The Big Five Motorcycle Boys

Through by Wireless

By Ralph Marlow

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"Got her at last, Hanky, Old Chum!" said Josh, as they heard a sharp crackling sound from the machine.

The Big Five Motorcycle Boys Through By Wireless

OR

A Strange Message from the Air

By RALPH MARLOW

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"The Big Five Motorcycle Boys In Tennessee Wilds"
"The Big Five Motorcycle Boys' Swift Road Chase"
"The Big Five Motorcycle Boys On Florida Trails,"

A. L. BURT COMPANY
NEW YORK.

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THE BIG FIVE MOTORCYCLE BOYS
THROUGH BY WIRELESS

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CHAPTER I.

ALONGSIDE THE BUBBLING SPRING.

"I've hatched up a little surprise for you, Hanky Panky; get ready now, so you won't faint dead away when I spring it on you!"

"Huh! no danger of that happening, Rooster, I guess; so go ahead with it!"

"Well, watch me open my right hand; and tell me, honest Injun, if you ever before now set eyes on what I'm holdin' in the same!"

The last speaker, who had been called by the queer name of "Rooster" by his companions, was a fairly well-grown boy of rather sturdy build. With two chums he was lounging carelessly under the shade of some trees, not far from the edge of a country road away up in the north-central part of Ohio. Close by, three well-kept motorcycles of an up-to-date type were standing erect, being sustained

as usual by the familiar contrivance that can be instantly dropped, so as to hold the rear wheel steady.

" Rooster " came honestly by his name, although his parents knew him as Christopher Boggs. He was a good-natured boy, but for a long time back, whenever he accomplished anything which he had been striving to do, he was apt to want to crow over it, slapping both hands vigorously against his thighs, and letting off one or more clarion calls, such as a barnyard fowl would emit when, having beaten his rival in an out-and-out fight, he had flown up on the fence, to announce his triumph to the entire neighborhood.

" Hanky Panky " also had another name, which was Henry Jucklin. This had easily been corrupted into " Hank " by his comrades; and then, later on, when the boy began to display a most decided inclination to play the part of a magician, and do all manner of sleight-of-hand tricks, he had fallen into the way of distracting the attention of his intended " victim," by waving his hands, and saying something like: " Now you see it, now you don't; hanky panky, change! " And anybody can see how quickly that name Hank became corrupted into " Hanky Panky," by which he was known to every boy in the town of Garland.

The third lad was named Josh Whitcomb, and his nervous movements were enough to stamp him

as a quick, impatient fellow, ready at times to go off without sufficient preparation. All the same, Josh was smart enough, as boys go, and pretty well able to take care of himself.

When Rooster slowly, and with many a chuckle, opened his hand, both of his mates immediately uttered exclamations that seemed to please him very much.

"Some staggered, ain't you?" jeered Rooster. "Didn't know that I snuck out early that morning, and hunted high and low till I found these three bogus half-dollars that you saw me throw away, when Rod or Elmer said we'd better get rid of the same, because they might drag us into trouble. But I did, all the same. Not so slow after all, eh, boys?"

"Well, what d'ye think of that, Josh?" ejaculated Hanky Panky, with a frown. "You know, I'd picked up one of the same, and I tossed it away off in the brush, never thinking I'd want to hunt for it again, to hold for a keepsake of those exciting events we ran across away down in old Tennessee. But here sleepy Rooster was on to the job. He recovered his *three,* and never said one word to us about it till now. My stars! but ain't he a slick article, though."

Josh had picked up the three apparently brand new coins, and began to examine them.

"I see you've made a heavy cross on these things, Rooster," he remarked.

"Yes," answered the owner, calmly. "I scratched the back of each, so I'd be sure and know it again. I don't want to pass one off some fine day, even if they are as good as the coins turned out from Uncle Sam's mints. You know, we understood that they had just as much silver in as the good ones, which isn't a full fifty cents' worth by more'n a little. The profit to the makers was that difference. And putting Uncle Sam's trade mark on the same was what got them in trouble."

What Rooster referred to has been told at length in the preceding volume of this series of stories; and any reader who has not enjoyed that account of the five motorcycle boys' adventures down in Tennessee, has missed a treat.

Hanky Panky began to assume a most woe-begone look. He even allowed a heavy sigh to well up from his very heart, as he went on to say:

"Look here, Rooster, you're a good fellow, and a friend of mine, ain't you? And you can understand how much I'd like to have kept that coin I had to throw away down there among the mountains of Elmer's old home land in Tennessee—keep it, of course just to sorter remember them happenings by, nothing else, I give you my word. Now, you've got three; and don't you think it'd be doing the square thing by a poor fellow to let him have just one coin? I always considered myself pretty smart, but I never once thought of sneakin' out that next morning, and

hunting up the plunker I'd tossed away. Say, how about it, Rooster?"

Hanky Panky's tone was wheedling enough to "wring tears from a stone," as Rooster laughingly declared.

"But it's all right, Hanky," he added, as he held out his hand toward the other. "I always meant for you to have one of these, you see. And another goes to Rod; that's only right, because he engineered things so fine for us down there. Sorry there ain't enough to pass around, Josh, or you'd have one, ditto our good chum, Elmer."

"Bully for you, Rooster; I ain't agoin' to forget that in a hurry, either. When I get my wireless to workin', why, I'll let you have a little fun out of it, grabbin' down messages that happen to be afloatin' through the air."

Josh chuckled at that, and said with an exasperating taunting manner:

"Wake me up when you get that same wireless to going, please, Hanky. If it's like a few other inventions of yours that I could mention if I cared to cudgel my poor tired brain on this hot afternoon, while we're waiting here for the other fellows to come along, it'll just keep on being *near* completion, till you get all tired out; and then you'll drop it all of a sudden, to take up some new stunt. Oh! I'm on to your ways, Hanky. You c'n play a lot of smart tricks, calculated to make us sit up, and take

notice; but when you attempt anything *real hard,* you get lazy, and keep putting things off and off, till it all wears out."

"Well, let me tell you, Josh Whitcomb," remarked the other, defiantly, "this wireless game of mine is not goin' to peter out that way. I never felt as much genuine enthusiasm in anything as I have in fixin' them poles up on top of our windmill tank tower. You wait and see, that's all!"

But Josh was apparently a "Doubting Thomas" when it came to believing that such a flip trifler as Hanky Panky could ever excel in a serious proposition, such as installing a wireless outfit seemed to be.

The way he nodded his head, and allowed that tantalizing smile to come over his face evidently nettled the other. Many a boy has been spurred on to excel, by just that same sort of skepticism expressed by a companion. It is apt to arouse every particle of grit and determination that lies deep down in his nature. And there are, after all, few boys but who have plenty of these traits, if only one can get them sufficiently aroused to bring out the best there is in them.

Somehow or other, all of them seemed to lapse into a condition of silence just about that time. Hanky Panky may have been considering how he could complete his latest fad, and be in a condition to send or receive messages without the need of a

wire connecting the several stations; Rooster was gazing at the other two false coins he held in his hand, and possibly allowing his thoughts to travel back to the stirring scenes associated with their finding; while Josh seemed content to just lie there on his back, with his cap shading his eyes from the streaks of sunlight that found their way between the thick branches of the trees overhead.

Once Josh grumbled that it was "awful warm there, since the breeze had died out;" and in the same breath asked if either of his chums saw or heard anything of the other two, whom they were expecting to come along that way, and who would join them at the little spring that gurgled up close by.

"Nothin' doing yet; so go to sleep again, Josh," Rooster had replied; after which they once more relapsed into absolute silence.

Later on, Josh sat up, and feeling thirsty, stepped over to the spring to get a drink of the cool water. He had apparently determined not to lie down again; and sitting there among the bushes, began to examine some part of his wheel; for Josh never knew when to leave "well enough alone," and was forever pottering at things; with the result that he had more trouble in the long run with the engine of his motorcycle than the other four boys combined.

It must have been nearly three o'clock by now, and even Rooster began to show some signs of im-

patience. He craned his neck several times, as though under the impression that he might be the first to sight the missing chums, and thus find himself in a position to announce their glad coming.

All at once Josh heard a low "hist!" Upon looking at Rooster he saw that individual holding up a warning finger, as though imploring the others not to make any sound.

Now, the first idea that flashed through the head of Josh was, naturally enough, that the other boys were in sight, and Rooster wanted to see if they would be able to discover where the three lay; for the bushes offered something of an effectual screen.

It was with this idea in mind that Josh condescended to lift his head, and on finding a little opening, where the bushes failed to come closely together, peered through the same.

Hardly had he done so than he began to manifest considerable interest in what met his view; and Hanky Panky having gone through about the same sort of experience, there were three of them crouching there, staring, and wondering.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOLLOW TREE POST-OFFICE.

"GEE! must be a hobo!" whispered Hanky Panky.

"Looks like it; but whatever is he doin' by that old tree, d'ye think?" Josh went on to say, in the lowest, and most cautious tone he could summon just then.

"How d'ye think I know?" Rooster answered, as though, being the first discoverer, he took the query to himself; "better just watch and see. P'raps he's goin' to climb up, and go to sleep there!"

"Look at him, would you; say, he chucked something in that hollow part, sure he did, fellows!" Josh declared, with a tremor to his voice.

"Seemed like a crumpled piece of paper to me, that's what it did," added Hanky Panky, every whit as much excited by the singular performance as were the others.

"'Sh! he's lookin' around now; keep mum, and don't anybody move an inch," warned Josh, himself remaining as stiff as though made of stone.

A minute later, and Rooster again remarked cautiously:

"There, he's shufflin' away now. Reckon he just

made up his mind what he heard was only a chipmuck a scamperin' among the leaves on the ground, while he hunted roots, or one of last year's nuts he'd buried long ago. Ta-ta, Mister Hobo! See you later, p'raps."

The three motorcycle boys turned curious glances upon one another.

"Now, what under the sun d'ye think he did that for, tell me?" Hanky Panky went on to say, as though puzzled greatly by the queer actions of the seeming tramp.

"Mebbe that's where he keeps his treasures," suggested Rooster. "Even a common hobo sometimes comes by things he sets some store by. I've been told they often run across a chance to pick up valuables, when they find a farmhouse unguarded, if the whole family is workin' in the fields. And that fellow looked slick enough to me to be a thief."

"But we all saw what he was puttin' in that hollow place," declared Josh; "and it sure looked like a letter of some kind."

"I think the same way, Josh," added Hanky Panky.

"Oh! you mean he's usin' that same hollow for a post-office box," observed Rooster, chuckling at the novel idea. "Then, later on, some other hobo, adriftin' along this way, will go to the hollow tree, put his hand in, and find the communication—is that it, boys?"

"Just about, I should say," replied Josh, nodding his head, sagely.

"And d'ye think he'll be apt to come along soon; because if he does we might get a chance to see him?" Rooster took occasion to remark.

"Oh! he mightn't come for a week; and you don't find me holdin' the fort that long," grumbled Hanky Panky.

"I should say not," echoed Josh, which was not at all surprising, considering how quick he was to want speedy action.

Even then he began to get on his feet.

"What you goin' to do, Josh?" asked Hanky Panky, following suit.

"Why, I thought we might as well step over, and knock up the postmaster, askin' to have a peep at the letter we saw dropped in the tramp's box, that's all," Josh replied, taking a step forward, when Hanky caught hold of his sleeve, and detained him.

"Wait up a minute, Josh," he said; "you're always in such a big hurry. Now, what's to hinder our trying each one to give a guess about that same hobo letter, and see who comes nearest to hitting the mark?"

"D'ye mean try and find out what he's gone and written there, and then proving the same?" asked Josh, rather pleased with the idea, as it offered a chance for finding out who would show the greatest smartness and keenness.

"That's the ticket," replied Hanky Panky. "Now, let's see what it ought to be. I say that it'll like as not turn out to be a scribble to Wandering Willie, telling him that if he wants a real good spread, to hunt up the house with the cupola, and the green shutters, just outside the town limits in Garland; and the warm-hearted Irish girl employed there will set him a table that will just about make his eyes stick out."

Josh laughed, for he recognized from the description given that Hanky Panky had his own home in mind when saying this; probably because Norah, the aforesaid Irish girl, had been known to feed many a tramp during the years she held forth.

"Next! now your turn, Rooster!" he said, turning on the original discoverer of the tramp who had made such a queer use of the hollow tree.

"Me? Oh! well, let's see, I hadn't thought of anything yet," returned the slow one, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, and then looking up with a grin, he continued: "I'll just turn Hanky's guess around, and say that it's a hobo note to Weary Walter, warnin' him to beware of the new dog they've got up at the Boggs place, which has a savage disposition, and is warranted to tear the clothes off'n every suspicious critter that steps in the yard. That's my idea; see if I ain't correct! And how about you, Josh; anything different?"

Josh assumed a knowing air.

"Well, I didn't just like the looks of that hobo, let me tell you," he started to say, in a reflective way. "Some of 'em look seedy enough, but you sorter feel as how they ain't *real* bad. But that man had the look of a tough case. Say, I'd hate to meet up with *him* on a dark road at night; and 'specially if I happened to be carryin' some money my dad wanted to send over to a neighbor."

"Whew! you sure sized him up, all right, then, Josh; he did look like a bad egg, for a fact!" declared Hanky Panky; "and now, in that case, then, what sorter letter do you say it is? Speak up, and afterwards we'll take a peek to prove who's nearest to right."

"Well, I guess now that it'll turn out to be some sort of a communication intended for another hobo belongin' to the same crowd, who'll be along here before long, tellin' him about a splendid chance there might be to break into a farmhouse, where there'd be rich pickings. P'raps he knows of a party that's been paid a big sum of money lately. They pick up news every-which-way, I'm told."

"That's some guess, all right," announced Rooster, in admiration; "and now let's see who hit the bull's-eye nearest."

They were already in the act of hurrying forward, heading for the big tree that was showing decided signs of decay, when voices were heard. This caused them to suddenly come to a halt, as the

thrilling suspicion assailed every boy that possibly some of the evil-faced tramp's companions were even then approaching.

"It's Rod and Elmer, fellers!" exclaimed Hanky Panky, with a look of relief.

"Yes, and there they come, as quiet as you please," declared Josh. "I never *can* get my machine to quit makin' sounds, like they seem to. Someway or other it don't act like it was as well built; and yet I've done everything under the sun to make it behave."

"Of course you have—whipped it to death!" grunted Hanky Panky, who knew just why Josh had so much trouble; "but let's wait here till they join us, and then tell what we saw that hobo do."

The two new arrivals discovered the others; and leaving their machines, they advanced toward them, stopping at the little bubbling spring to quench their thirst, while on the way.

"We've got something for you to guess, fellers!" announced Hanky Panky, with a grand wave of his arm, as though he thought he had been elected master of ceremonies, and delegated to explain matters.

"Go ahead, then," remarked Rod Bradley, the boy with the winning manners, and an air about him that plainly stamped him a leader among his fellows.

"Yes," added Elmer Overton, whose dark skin, and rather pleasing drawl, proclaimed his true

Southern birth; " let's hear it, Hanky. As we rode along both of us were just saying, I give you my word for it, that things seemed pretty tame right now, after we had that lively time down near my old home in Tennessee. Please begin, suh! "

Thus entreated Hanky Panky immediately started to explain. He managed to wrap such an air of mystery around the little occurrence that both Rod and Elmer eyed him suspiciously, for they were well aware of his propensity for practical jokes. Hanky Panky's chums always had to think twice before fully accepting any statement he made, especially if it seemed of an unusual nature; because all of them had at times been made victims of his little jokes.

" D'ye think it's so, Rod; or is he trying to get a laugh on us? " questioned the Southern boy, when finally the narrator ceased explaining.

" That's easily proven," chuckled Rod; and at the same moment he stepped forward.

Hanky Panky, of course, thought he meant to thrust an arm inside the hollow.

" 'Tain't fair, Rod," he observed, complainingly; " any of us could do that much. Oh! then you don't mean to try and feel for the letter, do you? I see what you're up to—lookin' for footprints near the big tree. Well, ain't they there, Rod? "

" That's right, Hanky," replied the other, as he arose from his knees. " I can see that some man has

been here, and just a little while back, too, for a bent blade of the grass straightened up right before my very eyes. Yes, I believe your story now, even if it does sound fishy. Suppose you see about that letter yourself; it's only right."

So Hanky Panky, being also urged on by Rooster, prepared to insert his arm into that gaping aperture where the tree was beginning to decay.

"Hope to goodness now there ain't a poison snake lyin' snug inside there," he remarked, with a plain shiver; for Hanky was more afraid of all sorts of reptiles than he would be of a great big bear, supposing such a wild beast could be loose in those Ohio woods, which of course was impossible.

Ten seconds later, and he hastily withdrew his hand; and as it came into view his chums could see that it gripped the very piece of crumpled dirty paper which the mysterious hobo had so carefully dropped into his novel post-office box, evidently intending the same for some comrade who knew of the use to which the hollow tree could be put.

Now, the fact that Rod Bradley was acknowledged as the leader among these boys was amply proven by the readiness with which Hanky Panky turned the soiled document over to him.

"You read the same out loud to us all, Rod," Hanky observed, as he made the other accept the document; and then the other four chums gathered around to listen, while Rod carefully smoothed out

the paper, and allowed his eyes to travel over what he found written there with the stub of a lead pencil evidently, though it had been gone over a second time in order to make sure that it was legible.

CHAPTER III.

ROD SHOWS THE WAY.

BEFORE reading the contents of the note out loud, Rod must have glanced over the same, for he was seen to look very serious, as though more or less impressed by what he saw there.

"Here's what it says, boys," he presently remarked, "and the man you called a hobo knows how to spell all right, which tells me he isn't just a common tramp. But listen, and hear for yourselves. 'Oswald:—all O. K. Got the trap set, and chances are ten to one the old fool will fall to the bait. We must pull it off this very night. No dog. Easy to get in through window on ground floor. He drew the money, just as you said he would, when you promised you'd be back with the hosses sure this afternoon or to-morrow, you didn't know which. Meet you at the same old place between ten and eleven. Looks like an easy rake-off for us. Cale.'"

Josh chuckled.

"I hit it closest, after all, didn't I fellows?" he demanded of Rooster and Hanky Panky.

"Looks like it, Josh," admitted the former, readily enough; for he was always willing to give credit where it was due. "And say, there can't be any way of getting around that stuff, can there? He's alettin' his pal know that everything's comin' their way, and that they'll pull off the job this very night! Wow! just to think of that, now, would you?"

"Mebbe we'd better take this letter to Chief Gallagher, and let him figure it all out," suggested Hanky Panky, when his proposition was greeted with a scornful laugh.

"He'd make the biggest mess of it you ever heard tell of!" declared Josh. "Did you ever know that wonderful Chief to earn his salt, when it came to getting on the track of clever rascals? I'd rather trust it all to Rod here, any day."

Rod smiled. How could he help but feel pleased, when he understood how he held the full confidence of his four good and loyal chums?

"I don't think that we ought to take this paper away at all, fellows," he started in to say; "though wait till I get a pencil out, and on the back of this envelope, I'll make as good a copy as I can. Then if we want to talk it all over with the Chief we'll be able to show him something."

"But what's your idea in not wantin' to take the original paper away, Rod?" asked Hanky Panky.

"Simply because we'd break the line of communication, that's all," answered the other, quietly.

"In a case of this kind it's better that you let the letter lie, to be found by the other party. Then, you see, they'll go right along carrying out their plans; and in that way they'll get nipped with the goods on them, as Chief Gallagher always likes to say."

"Hurrah for our Rod; he's the real goods, all wool, and a yard wide!" exclaimed Rooster, with considerable enthusiasm.

"But if you put that paper back in the tree, do you mean for us to hang out here a while longer, and see what sort of feller gets the same?" Hanky Panky asked.

"That was my idea," Rod assured him, as he took the paper over, and once more allowed it to drop into that little convenient cavity that was being used in lieu of a better post-office box. "Now, we haven't anything much to do, and this thing has got me worked up considerably. All in favor of waiting here say aye!"

Four voices gave an immediate assent.

"That settles it, then," Rod went on to say, as though pleased with their decision, which coincided exactly with his own views. "Now, suppose we get away from here, and hide. There's no telling when the other hobo might be along. This fellow evidently wasn't sure, and he must have had some business he wanted to attend to right away, so he couldn't wait here. That's why he left the

note, which he knew would fall into the right hands."

"We had a pretty good hiding-place over behind these bushes here," remarked Josh; "though for that matter, the idea of hiding didn't come to us at all. Fetch your wheels along, boys, and we'll make sure the whole lot are stood deep in the brush. It was only a chance that the hobo didn't get on to our machines. If the sun had glanced from any steel part, it would have told him enough to make him suspicious."

All of the motorcycles were soon concealed. There was no longer any chance of the presence of the five boys being betrayed by the shiny metal of which the several machines were composed.

"I'm awonderin', Rod," Josh started to say, when the other really took the words out of his mouth.

"What farmer is in danger of being robbed by these two rascals, isn't that it, Josh? Well, I'll tell you who I think it is—Abner Crooke."

Some of the others gave low whistles. This, however, was not intended as an expression of disbelief, but solely to show how much they wondered at Rod's being able to give so ready a guess.

"Tell us now, Rod, what makes you think that?" begged Hanky Panky.

"Yes, go on," urged Rooster. "So far as I c'n remember there wasn't a single name mentioned in that same hobo note. Why, it didn't even say it

was a farmer they meant to rob. However in creation you c'n up and say it means Abner Crooke beats me all hollow."

"As for me," added Josh, "I think I've caught on to what Rod means; but I ain't agoin' to say, only that I agree with him about them hosses now."

At that Rod laughed softly.

"I see you're on, all right, Josh," he commented. "It was just the mention of the word 'hosses' that gave me my pointer. Of course I may be wrong, but the way things look, I believe I've struck oil. You all know that Abner Crooke is rich, and that he's always been a natural David Harum, trading in horses every week in the year. That's right so far, isn't it, boys?"

They agreed with him that nobody could gainsay such a statement, for the wealthy old farmer's weakness in the trading line was well known; and also the fact that nine times out of ten he came out of the deal first-best. The tenth occasion was when he ran up against wandering gypsy horse traders; and there he had been badly sold more than once.

"Well, stop and think," continued Rod, as they settled themselves down in the covert they had chosen as their hiding-place, "this other man, who is called Oswald by the one you watched, must have had an interview with Abner, and offered to sell him certain horses for a sum the old dealer thinks a bargain. He promised to have the animals around

for examination either this afternoon or to-morrow, and must get strict cash for them. That would make Abner draw the money from the bank, and keep it in the house over night. And I guess they've learned enough of his habits to know just where he would be apt to keep the money about the house. So they mean to break in to-night, and rob him of all he's got on hand. How about that for a guess?"

"I think you have hit the right nail on the head, suh!" remarked Elmer, in his soft, even tones.

"The same here!" announced Josh, quickly; and the other two were not slow to admit that it certainly looked as though the keen-witted Rod had figured the case out exactly as it was planned by the plotting pair.

"Then let's drop our voices, and lie low," Rod told them. "This Oswald may not turn up for an hour or two; and then again, how can we tell but what he'll drop along before ten minutes have gone? Not another word from anybody above a whisper; and precious little of that, if you please."

"Gee! but this *is* exciting," muttered Hanky Panky, as he lay there on his stomach, and pulled leaves off, one by one, meaning to open up a little avenue, through the bushes, whereby he might be able to watch that tree which was being used as a rural free delivery post-office by the tramp thieves, called "yeggmen" by police officials throughout such sections of the land where their depredations cause

them to be looked upon as a great nuisance and menace to the peace of the community.

"Yep, begins to feel something like it was that other time, when we managed to recover what was stolen from the Garland bank," remarked Rooster; referring to an incident which we cannot take time just now to detail, but which was a stirring episode in the first volume of this series, as many readers will remember.

"Just wait and see what happens, that's all," advised Rod. "Of course I don't want to promise you anything, for I don't know more than you do; but chances are, we're going to get more excitement to the square inch out of this same happening than from anything we've ever run across in the past."

That was enough to set the others thinking. Rod was not the boy to make wild or rash assertions, and when he gave his opinion, it was generally the result of serious thought.

Once more he cautioned them to stop talking, and just sprawl there, taking things easy, while they waited to see what might transpire. If no one came inside of an hour or two, the others would be at liberty to run home on their wheels, and leave him there to keep up a lone vigil; though Rod knew Elmer, yes, and every one of the other chums, well enough to feel pretty confident that they would never consent to such a thing.

Possibly three-quarters of an hour passed. Then Josh, who had been lying with his ear to the ground, raised his head to remark:

"I can hear a car comin' this way, licketty-split!"

"A car!" repeated Hanky Panky, "but sure a *hobo* wouldn't have such a nifty thing as that. They do say that even hoboes are getting mighty particular what they accept in the way of a hand-out; but a car is goin' pretty warm, ain't it, Rod?"

"But these are hardly common hoboes, we've agreed on that, you know," replied the other boy, quickly. "They only play the part so as to get a better chance to pick up information, and lay traps to rob honest people, or country banks. One may make out to be a dirty tramp; while his partner rides around like a swell in an expensive car, and pretending to be a man of leisure, touring the country, or trading in fine horses, like this fellow seems to be doing. Quiet now, everybody, because he's nearly up on us."

"Yes," whispered Josh, hotly, almost hissing the words, "and as sure as you live, Rod, he's slowin' up, like he knew about this hollow tree, and meant to drop off to see if it held a letter for him. There, I see him!"

"Silence, everybody; only look, and don't even move a hand," cautioned Rod.

Every fellow had his private peep-hole, and

through this he watched. It turned out to be a speed car, painted black. The man in it had the customary goggles on, and so they could not see his face just then; but if he tried to read the note naturally he would have to lift the disfiguring glasses. And Elmer, who carried with him a little baby camera, covered with brown paper, so that no one would suspect what it really was, had made all preparations for snapping the fellow off, in case he found half a decent chance.

The man jumped out of his car, and stepped over to the hollow tree, while every boy's eye was riveted upon his movements.

CHAPTER IV.

SURPRISING CHIEF GALLAGHER.

"CLICK!"

It was only Elmer working his little camera; but as it happened to be very still at just that very moment, the slight sound was distinctly audible.

The man had stepped from the motorcar, and thrusting his arm boldly into the hollow part of the tree, was seen to secure the crumpled paper that Rod had tossed back where it was originally found. And just as Elmer expected, he unconsciously

pushed the disfiguring goggles high up above his forehead, so as to see the better while reading what his partner had written.

At the slight sound the man started, and looked suspiciously all around. Rod even thought he saw him let his right hand creep part way back of his hip, as though tempted to draw some sort of fire-arm he might have concealed in a pocket.

Fortunately not one of the secreted lads as much as moved a finger. Elmer held his small camera rigid, just as he had been using the same. And as it happened, just at that same second a rabbit came bounding along, unconscious of the nearness of its customary enemy, man. Discovering the motorcar driver standing there, it at first stopped to look, and then dashed wildly away.

The man laughed harshly.

"What a fool to think a rabbit might be some spy watching me get Cale's note," the hidden boys heard him say to himself, as he once more started to read.

He seemed to be greatly pleased by the little information contained in the missive. As he turned back once more toward his car, he was talking to himself, as men sometimes will do; and although too far away to catch more than a word here and there, they had no doubt but what he was commenting favorably on the way events were moving along.

Still not a boy dared more than wink his eyes, and breathe as softly as he possibly could. They

somehow did not like the looks of the man's face, as he frowned while looking around him; he undoubtedly had an exceedingly ugly temper, and only let him understand that they had been meddling with that precious letter thrust into the hollow tree by Cale, and doubtless he was in a frame of mind to attempt to do something desperate.

But presently he jumped into the car, the engine of which had kept humming away melodiously all the while the owner halted by the tree post-office.

Then the car shot away, going down the road at a fast clip.

"Steady! Don't show a leg until he's out of sight, because he may take a notion to turn his head and look back!" cautioned Rod, when he thought Josh, always the first to act, might jump up from his hiding-place.

Sure enough, the man did turn his head around, so that Rod's caution proved to be a wise thing, for he might have seen them, had they exposed themselves too soon.

But now he was gone, and presently they caught a glimpse of the car spinning along over a slight rise a couple of miles away. That seemed to assure them that the coast was clear; and accordingly all of the boys stood up.

"Well, that was a corking good idea of yours, Rod, to hang out here, and get a line on what the fellow called Oswald looked like," remarked Josh.

" Seemed to me I'd seen his face somewhere before, too," said Hanky Panky, knitting his brow, as if in deep thought; " though I own up right now it slips me every time I want to say where. But let me tell you, he's a nifty sort of a feller, don't you forget it. And chances are, he's got a smooth tongue, all right."

" He must have, if he fooled old Abner Crooke; because they do say he's the smartest farmer around Garland, or this section of Ohio," asserted Rooster.

" Well, what are we going to do about it; come along, and let's get busy," urged Josh, who was only happy when on the move.

" I think that this is too big a job for us to handle alone," Rod suggested. " Not that I wouldn't like to try; but if we fell down, and the farmer was robbed after all, they'd blame us for not telling the proper authorities about it. We'll have to confess to the Chief, after making him promise to let us have a share in capturing these rascals. How does that strike you, fellows? "

" I'd say it was all right," answered Hanky Panky.

" Couldn't be improved on, suh," added Elmer.

Both the others were quick to declare that they favored the plan Rod had suggested; and as that made it " pretty near unanimous," as Josh remarked, they called it settled then and there.

" We'll get our wheels out, then, and put back for

Garland," Rod went on to say. "But there's no need of any haste, and we'll take things easy. If we happened to meet that same Oswald on the road, he might get suspicious if he saw us heading for Garland like wild men."

"You're always looking out for what may happen, Rod," laughed Josh.

"I like to be prepared, anyhow," returned the other, as he started to push his heavy machine along, out of the screen of bushes. "It may never come, but all the same wise business men, yes, and house-owners, too, always insure their property against fire, you know. That's what I do when I try to look ahead, and count on the chances of certain things coming to pass. They may, and they may not; you never can tell."

As the road was good, and wide also, Rod and Elmer rode off abreast; though as a general rule the boys were accustomed to string along, at some little distances from each other, like nearly all wise motorcyclists are in the habit of doing, in order to lessen the chances of serious collisions; for they go at a terrific pace, and the slightest wobbling might bring about a catastrophe.

They had hardly covered three miles in this fashion when Elmer suddenly called out:

"Car coming ahead, Rod, and unless I'm away off in my guess, it looks mighty like that black racer we just saw leave us."

"You're just right, that's what it is, Elmer; and I hope none of the other boys will show any too much curiosity when we pass by," Rod went on to say.

The approaching car slowed down as it drew near them, and the man in it gave up half the road for the motorcycle boys. Rod noticed that he stared very hard at first one and then the other of them; and managing to turn his head for a few seconds, as he was moving along quietly at the time, he discovered that the fellow also took unusual interest in the others of the bunch of riders.

He had nodded to each one in turn, as nearly every motorcar driver is apt to do upon meeting others who are on the road, for there is usually a spirit of comradeship existing between all who handle the wheel, or the guiding grips.

"Hope he'll know us again when he sees us," called out Josh from just behind the two leaders, after a mile once more separated them from the lone chauffeur of the black car. "He stared hard enough, anyhow."

Rod said nothing. He was wondering, all the same, whether the man could entertain any possible suspicion concerning them.

"One thing I'm glad of," said Rod, turning to Elmer. "I went to a whole lot of trouble to rub out the marks of our wheels around that hollow tree, and if he chooses to stop there on his way

back, he isn't apt to find any traces of our having been in hiding. Of course, if he looked real hard, he might, but around the tree itself I'd defy him to learn the truth."

"Yes, and as he's just as likely as not to stop off there to satisfy himself," remarked Elmer, "I think you showed a long head, suh, I certainly do. But, then we expect that of you, every time. That's why we made you our leader; and if I do say it, we've never been sorry, either."

"Soft soap, Elmer," jeered Rod. "Any one of you would have done just as well, if you thought the rest expected it. There's Josh and Hanky Panky, they take things easy because they just think they don't need to worry. What's the use, when you've got another fellow to do it for you, Josh has said more than once. But I notice that he's getting to do a heap of his own thinking these days. What happened to us down there among the Tennessee mountains rather woke Josh up."

They were not long in arriving in the outskirts of Garland, which was a bustling place, one of the busiest in that section of Ohio.

"Come along with me, boys, and watch me develop that picture," said Elmer, when the others came tagging along close at the heels of the leaders. "You know I've got a quick way of drying the film, and I reckon now that befo' an hour goes past I can show you a print of the man's face."

"I'll go you there," declared Rod; "and besides being curious to know how you came out with that snapshot, why, I think it might help matters if we had the print to show the Chief. He might look over his Rogues Gallery, and see if it fitted in."

Accordingly all of them passed along to the humble home of the Overtons. They had been in rather reduced circumstances until very recently, when Elmer, assisted by his chums, had been enabled to discover where his old grandfather, now out of his mind, had concealed a bundle of valuable papers. These were destined to make things go easy with the widow and her children; as well as the harmless old man whom every one around Garland knew and respected, he was so simple, and yet such a fine old Southern gentleman, for all his lack of sound mind.

The picture, when hastily printed, turned out to be very good, considering the remarkable conditions under which it had been snapped off. Having dried it as well as he was able between two sheets of blotting paper, Elmer announced to his chums that he was now ready to accompany them to police headquarters.

It was just five in the afternoon when the boys drew up there. Chief Gallagher, a great, big, good-natured man, knew them all, and also entertained considerable respect for them too; which feeling was founded on certain things they had done some time before, in connection with the pursuit and arrest

of certain rascals who had broken into the bank at Garland, and carried off all the valuable contents of the big safe.

"Hello! this looks like a deputation of foremost citizens," he remarked, when the boys trooped into his office, and he held out his big hand genially. "To what am I indebted for this visit, boys; for I can see in your faces that you've got something up your sleeve?"

"We'd like you to take a look over your Rogues Gallery, Chief, and see if you've got any mug like this one," and as Josh spoke, Elmer held up the partly dried photo before the astonished eyes of the police official.

"Well, bless me, what's doing now?" Chief Gallagher burst out with. "Would you believe it, though he's grown a mustache since his other picture was taken, I do declare if you ain't showing me the face of one of the most dangerous confidence men and rogues outside of the penitentiary. I was just looking at his phiz, and a short sketch of his life not an hour ago, as it came to me in the mail from police headquarters in Columbus. If you've run across Os Walker you're wonders, that's all I can say, boys!"

CHAPTER V.

LAYING PLANS.

"THERE, did you hear what he said, Rod!" exclaimed Josh, always quick of speech. "He called that slick article of a fellow Os Walker. And you know as well as anything the man who left the note wrote it to Oswald!"

"Just what he did," echoed Hanky Panky.

"What note is this you're talking about, boys?" demanded Chief Gallagher, excitedly.

He had reason to display more or less curiosity and interest, for of late these five motorcycle boys had been pretty much in the limelight in the eyes of the good people of Garland.

"We've got one, all right," quoth Rooster; "show it to him, Rod, won't you?"

"I think, first of all, we ought to tell the Chief how it came some of you saw that hobo making use of the hollow tree for a letter box," the other went on to say.

At that Chief Gallagher smiled, and nodded his head encouragingly.

"Sounds interesting, anyhow," he observed.

"It *is* interesting, believe me," declared Josh.

So Rod went back, and began his little story by telling how the three chums were lying under the trees, waiting for himself and Elmer to come along, when they saw the tramp thrust the note in his queer post-office.

At the proper time he produced his copy of the letter, and Chief Gallagher was allowed to read it.

"Who's idea was this to make a copy, and leave the original?" he asked, looking around at the five eager boyish faces.

"Huh! guess you might know that without asking, Chief," retorted Josh.

"Who but Rod Bradley would be so level-headed?" remarked Hanky Panky.

"He said we ought never to think of taking the original note, because that would break the connection, and make them give up the game," Elmer advanced, as his share in the song of praise.

"I thought so," remarked the Chief; and then, bending an approving look on Rod, who was fast turning scarlet under this sort of thing, which he did not like at all, the big, pompous man went on to say: "and I want to remark that you did the right thing, Roderic, the right thing."

"Oh! that's nothing—for Rod!" declared Rooster.

"I should say not," cooed Josh.

"He always does the right thing, Chief," wound up Hanky Panky.

At that Rod laughed outright.

"Please let up on all that kind of talk, boys; you make me feel as if I was a little tin god on wheels; when you know just as well as anything that every one of you would have done the same thing, only you let me have the first say."

"Like fun we would," grumbled Rooster, skeptically.

"And now let me go on, and tell the Chief the rest of this queer affair," pleaded Rod.

"What! is there more still?" ejaculated the big guardian of the peace, as he rubbed his hands together expectantly.

"I should say there was, sir," declared Josh, chuckling; for if there was one thing he dearly loved to see, it was his chum Rod astonishing such a consequential old fellow as Chief Gallagher.

"Then go on, Roderic; you've got me stirred up pretty lively already, showing me Os Walker's picture, which you say Elmer here snapped off. Now I begin to get a grasp of things. You must have lain in wait until some one came and took out the letter, when you photographed him in the act. Yes, I can see he seems to be reading something. And he must have been in a car, too, because he's got goggles shoved up on to his cap."

"That hit pretty close to the mark, Chief," said Josh, beginning to think that after all the good-natured police official, whom he was accustomed to

terming a " mere wind-bag," might have his smart streaks.

" Tell him, Rod," urged Elmer, who did not fancy having the Chief guess things, when there was still a story to relate.

Rod accordingly took up the narrative again at the point he had left off. The police officer interrupted him several times in order to ask questions; but as these were generally intended to draw out more complete information, and apparently made in good faith, none of the boys objected, and least of all Rod himself.

When the story had been completed, even to their meeting the stranger in the automobile, and the piercing look he gave each of them, Chief Gallagher was plainly very deeply interested.

" Now, I want to say that when you thought to cover up the tracks of your motorcycle tires around that post-office tree, Roderic, you showed a level head, sure enough. Why, honestly, now, my lad, I don't believe I could have done better myself."

At that Josh broke out with an amused chuckle, for of old he knew how limited the capacity of Chief Gallagher was, when it came to strategy. There were a lot of people in Garland, of the opposite political faith, of course, who among themselves were in the habit, when speaking of the Chief, to refer to him as " that bone head, Gallagher."

However, he was a big man in his own opinion,

and the "majesty of the law," as represented in his brass buttons, silver shield, and that magic word "Chief" upon his cap, went a long way with the boys of Garland.

So when Josh noticed him turn quickly, as if to see whether any one had actually dared to laugh as he made that rather bombastic assertion, the quick-witted boy had the good sense to instantly start coughing, as though a sudden choking fit had seized upon him.

"Now, Chief," Rod went on to say, quite seriously, "I hope you'll not think of going back on your given word."

"Sure he won't, Rod," Hanky Panky broke in with; "Chief Gallagher never was known to do that. And he promised, as plain as anything, before you told him a word about what we knew, that he'd take the whole kit of us along with him when he started in to round up these law breakers."

There was rare diplomacy in this speech of Hanky Panky. Even Josh realized it, for he secretly took occasion to pat the other on the back, as though he could in this way commend him.

And really, if the Chief had even dreamed of changing his mind after obtaining all the information possible from these clever boys, he must have been completely disarmed after hearing these flattering words.

So he puffed out his tremendous chest, after a

way he had, that made him resemble one of those pouter pigeons Hanky delighted to raise as pets; and then went on to say in his patronizing manner:

"That's right, Henry, I'm known to be a man of my word. I may have my little faults; who hasn't, tell me; but once I promise a thing, and as sure as I live it's going to be done, or I'll know the reason why."

"And we'll all have a chance to go with you to-night, then, suh?" asked the pleased Elmer, who liked action, and plenty of it, almost as much as Josh himself did.

"You certainly can, Elmer, if there's any way to crowd you all into the big car I'll have to use," the Chief promised.

"Oh! we'll find a way to hang on, you can just depend on that, Chief," Josh hastened to assure him.

"But see here," the Chief remarked, frowning, and referring to what Rod had scribbled on the back of the old envelope, "if this is an exact copy of the note Cale left for Os Walker, how are we going to know just where these yeggs mean to make their haul to-night?"

"Oh! Rod figured that all out," asserted Hanky Panky, carelessly.

"Easy as lalling off a fog, too," added Rooster; who, once in a while, when excited, and desirous of saying things quickly, had a bad way of mixing

his expressions; but as his chums were accustomed to this, they never had any trouble about straightening things out, and in this case, of course he meant to say "falling off a log."

"As how?" asked the eager Chief.

"Why," Rod went on to explain, "I noticed that there was a horse deal in the air, and that he used the word 'farmer.' Now, Chief, everybody around Garland knows mighty well that there's only one wealthy old farmer who's always ready and willing to enter into a horse dicker."

"H'm! you probably refer to Abner Crooke, Roderic," the Chief remarked.

"Just who Rod picked out, first pop," said Josh.

"But—we don't know for sure," remarked the head of the police.

"Then we ought to find out right away," Rod told him.

"By sending one of my trusty men out to interview Mr. Crooke, you mean?" Chief Gallagher went on to say.

"Well, hardly that, Chief," the boy continued, with difficulty repressing a smile at the foolishness of such a move; "because, I take it these are pretty smart men, and one of them, perhaps Cale, may be watching that house; and if he saw a policeman go in, of course he'd take the alarm at once, so the game wouldn't be pulled off this evening, as they planned."

"Of course. Just what I was going to say myself, Roderic, on second thought, when you took the words out of my mouth," and the Chief looked so sternly in the direction of Josh that the boy did not dare chuckle again, although inwardly he was full of laughter.

"And besides," continued Rod, "what use would there be of visiting Mr. Crooke, when we happen to know that he has telephone connection?"

"Yes, I know that, because I had occasion to talk with him once over the wire, the time some one stole a horse out of his pasture. And we recovered the animal for him, too. But then that was only a small matter."

From the Chief's manner, as he made this indifferent remark, it was easy to draw the inference that he was so used to being concerned in big affairs, that such a petty triumph as recovering a stolen horse was barely worth mentioning.

But then the boys knew better, and could size Chief Gallagher up pretty well for what he was. They knew that he made a fine, imposing figurehead for the town police; but that his accomplishments in the past did not fill the citizens of Garland with any degree of pride.

"So suppose you call Mr. Crooke up right now, sir," Rod went on to say, "and without telling him too much, just find out if he is expecting a party

to call on him, either this afternoon or to-morrow, with regard to some horses."

"And if he's got the money in the house to pay for the same," added the big policeman, reaching out toward the 'phone that was on his flat-top desk.

"Well, excuse me," said Rod, quickly, "but do you think there's any need of asking him that? It might alarm Mr. Crooke, and cause him to do something that would break up your little game."

"But, seems to me," observed the Chief, looking very serious, "that would clinch matters, if we knew he was holding the money there to pay for the horses."

Rod smilingly pointed to the old envelope on the desk.

"We've already got Cale's word for that, Chief; you'll remember that he tells this Oswald their plan is working out all right, and that the farmer they expect to rob has *drawn the money from the bank!*"

Then Chief Gallagher brought his ponderous fist down with a bang.

"Of course what you say is true, Roderic, and I would have thought of it in another minute," he confessed. "And look here, now that you mention the fact, old Abner *was* in town early this afternoon. How do I know? Why, I bumped up against him coming out of the bank. So you see, that proves it all right."

He looked straight at Josh, as much as to say:

"See what a great brain I've got; and don't you ever again dare to snicker when in my presence."

"Still, it would be as well to prove it, Chief, don't you think?" argued Rod.

"Surely."

With that the Chief rang up, made his request for connection with Abner Crooke, and presently a high-pitched, squeaky voice inquired what was wanted.

"How are you, Mr. Crooke. I believe you're expecting a gentleman to deliver some horses?" the Chief went on to say.

"Well, I am," answered the farmer, snappishly, "but what business is that of yours?"

"Oh! none at all, Mr. Crooke. Good-day," and the Chief rang off, hanging up the receiver.

CHAPTER VI.

HANKY PANKY MEETS TROUBLE.

"SPLENDID!" exclaimed impulsive Josh.

"The whole thing is working out as fine as silk!" declared Hanky Panky.

Rooster involuntarily slapped both his hands violently against his thighs, and threw his head back, as though about to let out one of his high-pitched crows.

Apparently, however, he must have suddenly remembered where he was, and feared that such a violent demonstration on his part, while in the presence of the august Chief, might land him in the "strong room." At any rate, just when Hanky Panky and Josh were waiting with glee to hear the explosion, Rooster heaved a big, disappointed sigh, and relapsed into his former attitude.

"Well," remarked Chief Gallagher, complacently, "we know now for a certainty just where these two confidence yeggs mean to try and burglarize their house. And so it ought to be an easy job for us to land our birds."

Privately Rod had his own opinion about that.

He could remember more than one job that Chief Gallagher and his men had bungled in the past, simply through clumsiness. There was no telling what sort of success they were fated to meet with in the present case.

But then the boys believed they had simply done their duty in bringing to the police the startling information they had been able to pick up, "through the merest chance," as Rod put it; though his chums, among themselves, considered that much was due to his, Rod's, smartness in figuring things out.

If the whole affair turned out to be a fizzle, the fault would lie with the officers, and not upon the shoulders of the motorcycle boys.

These men whom they planned to foil in their

game, and perhaps capture, were as cunning as could be found among the rogue class. And once let them suspect that the police had scented their plans, and they would use that speedy black car to put many miles between themselves and the town of Garland.

The boys now prepared to depart.

"Be at the blacksmith shop out on the road leading to farmer Crooke's place at nine sharp, boys," Chief Gallagher told them, as he unbent his dignity enough to shake hands cordially with each one of the five chums.

"We'll be there," said Josh, promptly.

"Shain or rine," added Rooster with such eagerness, that, as Josh was wont to declare, he tripped in his speech, and "fell all over himself."

"And here's hoping," added the Chief, "that by sunrise to-morrow we'll have those two precious yeggs safe behind the bars, and can rest easy in the proud consciousness of duty well done. See you later, boys; and thank you very much for the zeal you've shown in this police matter. We won't fail the people; we never do!"

And so they left headquarters.

Rod glanced uneasily around as they reached their machines.

"What's the matter, Rod?" Josh asked, noticing this.

"Oh! I was only hoping that the man with the black car hadn't dropped into town since we stepped

in to see the Chief," replied Rod; "because, you know, if he happened to notice us coming out of here, he'd tumble to the fact that we must be wise to his crooked little game."

"But you don't glimpse him, I hope, Rod?" questioned Josh, nervously.

"Not at all, and so far as I can see, the coast seems clear," the other went on to remark.

"What next, Rod; is it home, and supper, for us?" asked Elmer.

"Let's run out to the corner where we generally separate," Josh suggested. "There a fellow can have his laugh out without being afraid of an arrest. And if Rooster here feels that he's just *got* to get that crow out of his system, why, he can, that's what."

As all seemed agreed, Rod jumped on his motorcycle and led the way. A few curious people had stopped, and smiled, at seeing the boys issue forth from police headquarters.

Perhaps they imagined that they could give a pretty good guess why Rod and his chums were there, and that it was in answer to an official summons, on account of speeding within the town limits.

There were some people ready to declare, on their honor, that when upon the pike they had often seen a cloud of dust rushing toward them, heard a rapid noise as of a small Gatling gun in operation, and never had even a chance to tell who was mounted

on the flying motorcycle that shot past like a whirlwind.

But of course such talk only came from certain old-fashioned people, who viewed with alarm every modern innovation, such as was intended to keep up with the times.

Presently the five boys had dismounted again, at the point indicated, just to exchange a few more remarks before separating.

"How about telling our folks?" asked Elmer.

"That was one thing I had in mind," replied Rod. "And I guess every fellow had better do just what he thinks best."

"Huh! you don't ketch me telling nobody," grumbled Hanky Panky. "My folks'd be sure to put a stop to all my fun. Because, you see, they'd get the silly notion in their heads I'd be in danger, if so be them fellers and the *po*-lice got to scrappin', and exchangin' shots. Wimmen ain't got no sense about such things anyhow; just as if we'd go and take any chances of gettin' hit? Why, my Maw even tried to persuade me to give up my grand wireless idea. Said mebbe I might fall off the tank tower; or p'raps lightnin'd follow up my wire antennae, and knock me silly. Sure I don't say a word. I'll be as mum as an oyster."

"Well, do just as you think best," Rod went on to say. "But I hope that when half-past eight

comes, every one of us will be able to meet right here."

"We don't bring our wheels this time, do we, Rod?" Rooster asked.

"Shank's mare goes with us," came the reply. "Besides, it's only a little walk by a short-cut, from here to the old blacksmith shop on the other road. And there are times when motorcycles may be a nuisance, just as again they are useful. I'm off, fellows. Half-past eight, remember."

So they separated.

Whatever logic may have been employed by those of the boys who decided to relate the whole story at home, it must have won out.

When half-past eight came, the entire five of them had gathered at the specified rendezvous, Rooster, as usual being the last to show up.

"Now, that we're all on deck," Rod announced, "I guess we might as well be starting for the old smithy."

"Yes," added Josh, glad to get started, "because, if we're there *ahead* of time Chief Gallagher can never say he came along exactly at nine o'clock, and not finding us, took it for granted we'd got cold feet, and backed out."

And so, leaving the road, Rod led his four chums "across lots," since he knew of a short-cut that would save considerable walking.

It was cloudy, and pretty dark. Only by using a

little electric torch he carried could Rod see the path through the bushes.

All at once there broke out a shriek from Hanky Panky.

"Oh! help! help! there's a snake wrapped right around my leg! And he just bit me, sure he did, fellers! Oh! I expected this; and now I'll swell up like a balloon!"

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE ROAD TO THE OLD SMITHY.

When poor Hanky Panky cried out in this dismal manner, it goes without saying that the most intense excitement followed.

Those who were closest to him began jumping nervously around. They could not see any snakes, nor were any angry rattlers making violent sounds with the "boxes" they carried at the ends of their tails. But then the mere possibility of Rod having unconsciously led them into a snake infested patch of lowland was enough to excite anybody.

"Oh! ain't anybody agoin' to help me?" groaned the wretched Hanky Panky. "There! it's grabbin' at my leg again, sure it is! Every time I go to walk it just smacks me! Somebody knock it off!

Oh! are you all goin' to run away, and leave me here?"

Hanky Panky ought to have known better than to accuse such faithful chums of cowardice. Truth to tell, there was Josh already trying to break off a branch of a tree; and even Rooster, having stubbed his toe against a fair-sized stone, was attempting to drag this out of its bed, with the idea of using it as a weapon.

Rod, in the advance, upon hearing all this row, immediately turned in his tracks. He was already bearing down on the scene, whipping the glow of his little flashlight torch to the right and to the left, in the endeavor to discover the truth.

And as he came hurrying up, he aimed directly for the spot where the boy who always had a great horror of snakes stood, fearing longer to move a foot, because such action seemed to only anger the reptile that had twined around his left leg, causing it to attack him afresh.

Rod took one look at the terrible "monster." Then he stood stockstill, with that white glow bearing full upon Hanky Panky.

Josh gave a wild whoop.

"Look at the snake, fellows!" he cried, shrilly. "Did anybody ever see the like before? An old rusty coil of worn out telegraph wire the linemen must have thrown away! And when Hanky stepped on the same, why of course it curled right up his

leg. And when he moved, it made the upper end slap against his knee! Oh! this is too rich for anything! Take it off, Rod, before the old thing bites him some more. And say, let's bind that wire around the poor fellow, like he was a bale of hay. Then when he goes and swells up like a great big gas balloon, why, he won't *bust,* anyhow."

By now Hanky Panky saw what it was.

He regained his lost courage wonderfully fast, and began to kick that left leg of his until he had sent the obstinately clinging coil of wire flying among the neighboring bushes.

"Huh!" he grunted, "some fellers never *can* take a joke, seems like. As if I didn't know it was only an old wire coil, all along. Huh!"

Rod never said a word.

He had his own private opinion in the matter, and it was founded on the fact that when, by chance, in looking with his light to see if the treacherous wire had done Hanky's leg any damage, he put his hand on the boy's arm, he found that the other was still trembling all over.

And judging from this, Rod could give a pretty good guess that, regardless of what he might say, Hanky Panky's alarm had been genuine.

He hated and feared crawling things of all kinds. It was a weakness of the boy, which he had tried in vain to overcome.

However, no damage had been done by the wire,

thanks to the stout leather leggins the motorcycle boy, in common with his chums, wore, not only when expecting to use his machine, but at other times also. And there is really nothing more useful in the woods, than such a means of protection for the lower limbs. They render the camper impervious to bruises from rocks and logs, attacks from snakes; and prevent much discomfort, such as may arise from thorny bushes, "beggar lice" and similar things.

"But we're all pleased it isn't as bad as we feared, and that's a fact, suh," Elmer observed, when they were ready to advance again.

"So am I," admitted Hanky Panky; which served to draw a chuckle from Josh, followed by a contemptuous:

"Joke! Huh!"

The other chose to ignore this taunt. In reality, Hanky Panky, conscious of his guilt, was only too willing to let the subject drop. The sooner it was forgotten the better he would be pleased.

And Rod knew only too well that had the little adventure with the coiled wire fallen to the lot of the dauntless Josh, he must have received more or less of a bad shock before realizing the truth.

Any boy would; and therefore Hanky Panky, with his pet aversion for snakes could not be blamed for getting excited.

So a fresh start was made.

Rod took pity on poor Hanky Panky. He did not believe they were apt to run upon any reptiles; and even though such should prove to be the case, felt sure that the reptiles would be of the harmless garter snake variety. But in the mind of Hanky Panky they were all pretty much alike, and he hated the whole species.

On this account, then, Rod maneuvered so that Elmer walked ahead, while Hanky Panky was asked to keep right at the heels of the one who carried the little flashlight torch.

Deep down in his heart the nervous boy undoubtedly felt grateful to Rod. And he could not but believe that the chum they looked upon as their leader must understand just what his weakness sprang from, because Rod never made fun of him as Josh did.

The short-cut took them by a direct route from one road to the other. As it saved considerable distance it was used, in the daytime at least, by many persons; for Americans are naturally averse to going around, if they see half a chance to cut across lots.

"Here we are at last!" Hanky Panky was heard to say, as he scrambled out of the bushes, climbed a low bank, and stood on the road.

"And *all* of us safe and sound, thank goodness!" Josh remarked; but no notice was taken of what he said, which was undoubtedly meant to

serve as a "chip on his shoulder," daring Hanky Panky to knock it off, and plunge into a war of words.

The other boy knew about that old proverb "speech is silver, but silence is gold." He also realized that there were times when it paid a fellow to just forget that he possessed a tongue. And this was one of them.

"It ain't far from here, is it, Rod?" asked Rooster, who was breathing rather hard after his exertions in hurrying, stumbling, and then clambering up that last little elevation.

"The smithy, you mean, I take it, Rooster!" replied the other. "Why no; seems to me as if we ought to make it in less than five minutes from now."

"And we're in plenty of time, too, ain't we?" demanded Josh. "That little exciting adventure with the wicked wire snake couldn't have delayed us much, I guess."

Rod looked at his nickel watch.

"Twenty minutes to nine," he announced.

"Fine!" exclaimed Hanky Panky, determined not to show any sign of annoyance no matter how Josh kept on bantering him.

"There's no need of using my flashlight any longer," Rod went on to say, "now that we're on the road. If we met anybody, they might think we were headed for some farmer's apple orchard."

"Well, we are, ain't we?" chuckled Rooster, as he fell in alongside Hanky Panky, when the whole of them struck out along the pike.

Talking, as boys usually do, and with little sallies of humor now and then that lost none of their pointedness because Rod kept his chums more or less repressed, they presently came upon what had once been a blacksmith shop.

The owner had seen a chance to kill two birds with one stone by removing to the cross-roads a mile away, where, having added to his outfit, he was prepared to attend to the traffic along both roads, tinker at automobiles, as well as shoe horses, and mend broken down vehicles.

Now the old smithy was a deserted place, and fast going into a ruinous condition. Sometimes boys from town played in and out of the building; and there were those who prophesied that some day it would probably go up in flames and smoke; but no one cared, least of all the blacksmith owner, who was reaping a rich harvest at his new location.

It had long been a landmark around Garland. But the shop which once rang with sledge and hammer striking the anvil, and sending out showers of glowing sparks, was now as quiet as the nearby graveyard, where the white stones stood out like ghostly figures, as the boys passed along close by the fence.

And both Hanky Panky and Rooster noticed how

the vaunting Josh waited for the others when he came to the corner of the cemetery. The latter nudged Hanky Panky in the ribs, and took occasion to whisper:

"Even if he won't own up to it, that there Josh is just about as scared of ghosts, and such things as you always was of snakes."

"And just wait," muttered Hanky, "some day I'm goin' to surprise him. They say it's a long lane that's got no turning."

"Yes," added Rooster quickly, "and sometimes the torm will wurn—I mean the turn will worm—hang it, you know what I do mean, Hanky."

Hanky Panky evidently did, for no more was said, and they had now arrived at the old smithy. Here they sat down to wait, and the minutes passed slowly.

"Listen, fellows!" suddenly exclaimed sharp-eared Josh; and all of them plainly heard the distant sound of the town clock striking the hour.

"Nine o'clock, fellers," grunted Hanky Panky; "and now where's Chief Gallagher at, tell me?"

"I hear a car coming, and from Garland too!" declared Josh, and all strained their ears to listen.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WIRELESS BEE.

"GUESS it's them, all right," remarked Hanky Panky, when they discovered that the approaching car had slowed up, as though about to stop.

"I c'n see a lot of men with police caps, in the same, sure I can," Rooster was heard to exclaim; though up to now no one had ever known that his eyes were so wonderfully keen; but then imagination sometimes goes a long way.

It turned out that Chief Gallagher and three of his men, about all the night relay, in fact, were present; doubtless he had called upon the day squad to serve extra hours on this special occasion, in order to keep the peace in Garland. It was not often that such a glorious opportunity came to the "uniformed force" to distinguish itself; and every man must of necessity feel something of the responsibility that being a policeman brings in its train, so that he would be willing to make personal sacrifices for the general good.

"Hello! Chief, that you?" called out Rod, rather softly, just as though he did not know that fact positively already; but then something was nec-

essary in order to let the other know they were on deck, ready for their part in the enterprise.

The Chief said that it was, and also expressed his gratification that the boys were prompt in their attendance on the arranged schedule.

Possibly he might have been just as well pleased could he have found any reasonable excuse for going on the expedition without having to take them along, because, then, the glory of the capture would belong wholly to the police. The Chief knew these five motorcycle boys of old, and was well aware of the fact that they had a little failing for "doing things" in such a brilliant fashion that they won the plaudits of the citizens. He could look back to several such instances.

But then, at the same time the Chief was shrewd enough to realize that if he cut loose from Rod Bradley and his chums, after they had supplied him with about all the information he possessed regarding the intended burglary at the home of Abner Crooke, and then in some dismal way or other made a failure of the raid, he would be apt to find himself "hauled over the coals" in a manner far from pleasant.

Of two evils, he preferred to have the boys "tag along," as he termed it, to share in either the glory or the ignominy that was to come.

The Chief was not so very dull after all; at any rate he knew which side of his bread was buttered;

and the folks with whom Rod and his chums were connected had votes that might some day prove the turning point in deciding whether Garland as a whole needed a new Chief of Police, or could stand the present incumbent for another term.

And so the five boys were assisted into the car, in the best way possible. Since there were already four men in the same, several of them of rather portly dimensions, as witness the Chief himself, it would seem to be a pretty tight fit to crowd five others aboard, even though they were agile boys.

Rod settled that matter by squatting on the running board on the right side of the car, managing to find a seat on the edge of the door; while Josh took pattern of his act, and used the left door for his operations.

"All right, Chief, you can start when you feel like it," remarked Rod.

"Sure you won't fall off, are you, both?" asked the other, a little nervous, because to a man of his ponderous size it would have been next to impossible to retain his equilibrium any length of time, when perched on such an unstable foundation as a low door of an automobile.

"Oh! we're as comfy as pie!" declared the confident Josh; "and nothing short of landing the whole shebang in a ditch would shake us off, would it, Rod?"

"But we don't expect to hit up any great pace,

you know," remarked the Chief, as though that fact reconciled him to having those two boys holding on outside the car.

Farmer Crooke lived just about three miles outside the town limits, which, while some distance indeed, should one start to cover it by walking, is looked upon what Hanky Panky denominated as a "flea bite," when in a "gas wagon."

In fact, to some of the boys it hardly seemed as though they had got fairly started along the road, when one of the policemen, who was well acquainted with the neighborhood, remarked that they were nearly there.

Accordingly they slowed up, and began to really creep along, keeping on that side of the thoroughfare where the shadows were most dense.

Apparently this road was very little traveled after nightfall, for they had up to now failed to meet with a single vehicle of any description. The fact of the matter was that it had rather an unenviable reputation, since within the last year several farmers, coming home late, after disposing of their produce had been held up by daring thieves, and forced to disgorge their wallets containing the full receipts for the loads they had sold in Garland. And taking warning, they managed nowadays to start home earlier, so as to get there by daylight.

No one among the party in the crowded car

ventured to complain of the fact that the pike seemed lonely. It answered their purpose admirably, since they were enabled to come to a stop close to a gloomy patch of woods, and run the car in among the trees, without having incurred any chance of discovery.

"Listen! there's a watchdog barking!" remarked one of the policemen.

"Too far away to belong to Crooke, though," another went on to say; and of course he was the man who happened to know the neighborhood thoroughly.

"Yes," Josh quickly broke in with, "we understand that he ain't got a dog anyhow. I've been to his place, and never remember meeting with one; and then again if you stop to think you'll recollect that in the note, Cale says positively that they didn't need to fear a pup, because there was no dog around."

After leaving the car well hidden, the police detail, flanked by the five motorcycle boys, started to move along in the direction that, if followed for a short time, would bring them to the farm buildings of Abner Crooke.

Chief Gallagher stopped once to hold a whispered conversation. He wanted all the information he could gather, regarding the lay of the land, how many people the rich old farmer kept on his place, and all that.

When collected from every available source, the statistics seemed to stand about like this: Abner Crooke, for all his wealth, was a crabbed sort of an old widower. He had a single hired man, a colored individual named Adolphus George Washington White, who slept in the loft over the stables; and an old woman housekeeper. During the day a girl came to cook and do other work; while several hired hands also helped harvest his crops.

But at night Abner and the old woman, whom people believed might be some sort of distant relation to the farmer, were virtually alone in the rambling farmhouse.

He had never kept a dog; but in Garland there were many stories told of queer traps which Abner was accustomed to set, consisting of wire snares, which, when connected with a strong series of batteries, were apt to give an intending burglar a most unpleasant experience.

Indeed, the boys believed in these yarns so thoroughly that, while many other farmers along the pike had suffered from nightly depredations on their orchards and melon patches, Abner Crooke was severely let alone.

He was moreover a shrewd old chap, and doubtless secretly enjoyed this sense of immunity; for he often looked at the groups of boys he met on the road, coming home from the " ole swimmin' hole," or fishing excursions, with a sly twinkle in those

deep gray eyes of his, as though chuckling over the way he had taken to keep them from molesting a single thing on his farm.

Now, possibly these two intending burglars knew all about the peculiar devices of the man to whom they expected to pay a night visit; and they may have learned through devious ways just how to sever important wires, and render all his dreaded system of wire protection harmless.

Whether this were so or not mattered little or nothing to Chief Gallagher. He had only one thought, and that was to snatch as much glory out of the situation as possible.

When mention was made of how the farmer utilized wires in order to protect himself against intrusion, Hanky Panky was seen to show unusual interest. His comrades had no difficulty in guessing why this should be so; for whenever Hanky took up a new fad he was apt to plunge into it "head over heels," and really pursue it to the limit; and just at present he had that "wireless bee" humming so loudly in his head that even the casual mention of the word "wire" seemed to thrill him greatly.

"Huh! never occurred to me before," he even muttered to Rooster, who chanced to be his right hand neighbor, as they started once more along the road, "that p'raps I might interest Farmer Crooke in my wonderful wireless scheme. Say, it'd be a

great idea now, wouldn't it, if he'd let me put a station on his place up here, and get interested enough himself to learn how to send and receive. Got a notion to sound him on that very subject, when I get the chance."

But he received cold comfort from the more practical Rooster.

"Oh! let up about that crazy business, won't you, Hanky?" groaned the other. "You just seem to think every fellow is as wild to get messages hummin' through the air as you are. Why, it don't seem to excite me any; and as for that wise old farmer takin' hold of such a silly thing, you make me laugh when you mention it. I c'n just see him squeezin' out a five-dollar bill to stand for his share of expenses?"

"Well, you never can tell," muttered the undaunted one, shaking his head as if far from convinced; "and I've just *got* to get another station planted somewhere, so's I c'n try things out, the further away the better. P'raps now, Rod might give me a chance, if the Crooke business didn't pan out decent, and go away off with me, so I could get busy. Sho! now, why didn't I think of that before?"

"Well, keep quiet about your old wireless now, anyhow; because the Chief is lookin' back this way, like he hears you mumbling to yourself, Hanky; and he might get huffy to have you goin' on that

way," Rooster whispered in the ear of his chum.

Arriving at the point where the Crooke farm began, they all secreted themselves in the bushes adjoining the pike. From this point they could just manage to see the smaller road that led up between the fences to the barnyard of Abner Crooke, and which it was possible might be used by the intending burglars when they came to carry out their bold raid.

Some time passed away. They heard distant dogs barking; and then the crowing of various fowls, as though word was being sent along from farm to farm that the first watch had expired.

Then from hand to arm was passed the prearranged signal for the utmost silence; as a couple of dark, shadowy figures came along the pike, turning into the side road close by, and vanishing in the direction of the nearby barns of the farmer.

CHAPTER IX.

AN EXCITING TIME.

"Was that them?" whispered Hanky Panky, in Rod's ear; for by chance he was close alongside the other.

"Seems like it must have been," came the low answer.

"But, I thought they had a car?" objected Hanky Panky, who never felt satisfied until his curiosity ceased to burn.

"We know they did, because we saw it," Rod told him. "But chances are they've left it hidden somewhere, just like we did. And now, break away, Hanky. The Chief acts as though he expected to get busy."

"Good for that!" the other could not help muttering; for boys never do like inaction, which often seems like a waste of time, especially if they happen to be built along the impulsive order.

Sure enough, there was some sort of stir among the police. Apparently the head of the force was now positive that the two hobo thieves must be at work in the region of the farmhouse. He considered it good policy to begin drawing in his lines, and making some sort of start, looking to a complete surrounding of the building.

They had talked it all over before, so that every one, men and boys alike, understood what the plan of campaign was to be like, and just how each should share in its carrying out.

Some little time had elapsed since those two figures had flitted past, when the word was given to make a move.

Creeping silently along the lane, they presently saw the barns loom up ahead, outlined against the cloudy heavens.

Not a sign of a light was in evidence anywhere, and any one who did not know to the contrary would easily believe that Farmer Crooke's place was resting under the same peaceful conditions that had always been the rule in the past.

But Rod and his four chums knew better.

They were fully aware of the fact that right then and there a pair of bold rascals must be negotiating an entrance into the farmhouse that had never before been molested by any of their kind.

The knowledge constantly thrilled them. Despite all their efforts to the contrary they could feel that their hearts were throbbing furiously. It was certainly an exciting time, and one none of those five lads who took part in the adventure, would ever be likely to forget.

From the nearby stables came certain low sounds; but the boys knew that these proceeded from cows moving around, or horses pulling at the hay in their racks.

The colored man was undoutbedly fast asleep in his room above. And chances were, he would know nothing about the affair until it was all over.

In the forward movement Josh happened to pair off with Rod. This was just as well, for it gave Rod an opportunity to check any rashness on the part of the impatient chum.

Where the others went they could not just say, for the gloom swallowed them up. But it was a

part of the Chief's plan, as he had been very careful to explain, to completely surround the house. Then, when the opportunity came, they would give the robbers a startling surprise.

Rod and Josh moved forward.

The farmhouse was their objective aim, and already they could tell where it lay, since a chimney stood out, first of all, against the overcast sky.

"Got your little electric light handy, I hope, Rod," Josh whispered.

"Yes," came the short reply, for Rod did not think it wise to encourage any sort of conversation under such conditions.

"Because we might need it right bad, you know," Josh went on to say.

"Um, um," was the only way Rod answered him; and perhaps Josh guessed from this that his companion was not in a humor for talking, even in whispers, for he said nothing more.

Now the roof of the farmhouse stood out against the sky. They could not be more than forty feet away, and as they kept on advancing, slowly and cautiously, in another minute or so they must arrive at the walls themselves.

To tell the truth Rod was not convinced that Chief Gallagher was going about this affair the right way.

It seemed to him that they would have been wise to have just nipped the thing in the bud, as it were.

This could have been done by suddenly jumping out, and confronting the two rascals at that moment when they were within a few yards of where the police officers lay hidden.

They may have been desperate men, but upon being confronted by what seemed to be a dozen police, a light suddenly thrown on the scene, and then hearing the Chief's gruff command to elevate their hands, why, it did not seem as though they would be reckless enough to attempt flight.

But then that did not suit the ideas of Chief Gallagher. It was not according to what he believed to be the only right way of catching thieves. He was a great hand for always declaring that the only proper way to get a thief was to "catch him with the goods on." Then there could be no loophole for escape when the trial came along, since the evidence would be so overwhelming.

Well, perhaps this method might be a good one. Rod did not pretend to be up in such matters, and the Chief ought to know, for it was a part of his business.

All that the boy thought about it was that in carrying out his favorite idea the Chief was taking a whole lot of unnecessary risk.

These things were passing through his mind when he crept forward at the side of Josh.

Rod had one good trait about him, and his chums had always envied him its possession. This was his

faculty for remaining cool under the most trying conditions. Looking back, Elmer and the others could hardly remember the time when they had seen Rod excited, and certainly never to such a point that he could be called what Hanky Panky termed "rattled."

Right now his mind was as clear as a bell, and he had no difficulty in grasping the situation as it presented itself to him.

It was different now, with Josh.

When Rod came in contact with the other, as they pushed slowly forward, he felt him trembling all over. This did not mean that Josh was afraid; far from it, because every boy knew that he had a bold nature, and had never been the one to balk when an occasion arose calling for grit.

"Steady, old fellow!" whispered Rod, thinking it wise to break his silence at this critical stage of the game. "Get a grip on yourself. It's all right!"

So Josh, realizing that he was allowing his feelings to carry him too far, probably put the brakes on, and took a fresh start.

They were by this time close to the house, and Rod wondered what would happen if any of the Chief's party came into collision with the brace of rascals.

Of course, it was fully expected that by now they must have forced an entrance, some way or other,

and were busily engaged inside the farmhouse. In order to get around they would have to make use of a light, and Rod wondered why nothing of the kind had been seen.

The truth, however, became manifest, when he reached the side of the house. Wise old farmer Crooke had stout shutters to every window, solid ones at that, and every night before he retired he was undoubtedly accustomed to seeing that these barriers were all tightly closed.

The Chief had carefully instructed them in their duties. Rod and Josh did not mean to keep on moving around the house, now that they had arrived close to the wall. They were to remain on duty, keeping a close watch over that portion of the building.

Still, Rod did not see any reason why this should keep them from taking a look to the right and to the left, within a reasonable distance. He was feeling more than curious to know whether the two men had really managed to gain an entrance. Perhaps something had alarmed them, and they had given up the attempt, for that night, at least.

He kept hold of his comrade, thinking it the part of wisdom, for Josh had in the past been known to do some queer things, and straying away was among the list of his faults.

And then, all of a sudden Josh caught his foot

in some loose wire, so that he stumbled, and would have fallen, only that Rod held him up.

An immediate investigation explained the nature of his trouble. And the presence of the wire at that particular point must have aroused Rod's suspicions; for on rising to his feet again, his first act was to reach up, to feel of the window above.

Sure enough, it was wide open! And the heavy shutters lay flat back against the house.

Evidently, then, this was the avenue through which the two men had made their way in. The carefully arranged plans whereby Farmer Crooke expected to be warned of any attempt to break into his house, must have fallen flat before the ingenuity of such a wide-awake pair of rogues.

Just then Rod wished, oh, ever so much, that there was some way of communicating with the Chief, so that he could gather his men at this particular point, and overwhelm the thieves as they came out.

But strange to say, no arrangement of this sort had been made by Chief Gallagher. Rod had thought it a little queer before; and now he considered that such neglect was apt to turn out a great mistake.

Both he and Josh had managed to arm themselves with clubs, but it would have been much better could they have summoned the stout Chief and his three henchmen to complete the trap.

Rod thought the whole thing over seriously, and

had almost decided to send Josh off in search of the Chief, when from inside the house there suddenly broke out a racket that put an end to all plans along these lines.

CHAPTER X.

THANKS TO THE GALLANT POLICE.

From the nature of the outcries Rod instantly guessed that the old farmer must have awakened, to find thieves in his room. And like almost every other householder, his first thought was to shout out in alarm.

Some sort of scuffling sounds followed, as though the two men had immediately pounced upon old Farmer Crooke. If he had possession of any weapon they must have snatched it away, for there was no such sound heard as a pistol shot.

If the farmer had in some rude fashion been reduced to silence, the same could not be said of the old housekeeper.

Aroused by the outcries, and realizing that the house must have been entered, she began to scream at the top of her shrill voice, back of the security afforded by her locked door.

Perhaps she may at the same time have set des-

perately to work barricading her door with bureau, washstand and anything else that would serve the purpose.

Rod, upon realizing that the crisis of the game had arrived, determined to let the Chief know where the danger point lay. He thought it would be a great pity if those two rascals managed to get away after all. And what use would it be to have the officers standing guard over the front and rear doors, if the thieves expected to leave the house by means of the same window they had used to enter.

Accordingly Rod took it upon himself to give a shrill whistle. Surely the Chief would understand what this meant, and hasten toward the spot.

Meanwhile, there was nothing the two boys could do but stand there, clubs in hand, and await developments. If it came to the worst, Rod calculated, and they were thrown upon their own resources, perhaps they might be able to give a good account of themselves.

So he gripped his stout cudgel afresh, just as doubtless he had many a time taken a new hold upon his favorite bat, when it was his turn to toe the rubber, and a clean hit meant a good deal for Garland High's nine.

"Be ready, Josh!" he muttered to his comrade.

"As if I ain't just burning up with that ready business," came the prompt reply, coupled with a long intake of breath, like a sigh.

Still that racket was going on inside the house, though Rod realized that the chances were the main part, if not all, came from the old woman, who was letting out shriek after shriek, and tumbling the furniture about in her room.

Such thrilling sounds were enough to excite any one. Even Rod confessed that his nerves were "on edge," more than he had ever known to be the case.

Hanky Panky afterwards declared that he had never heard such ear-piercing sounds but once in his life, and that was when a pig he was chasing got stuck under the fence.

Looking steadily upward toward the window, while waiting for something to happen, once or twice Rod thought he caught a flash of light.

It must be, he decided, that the thieves, believing they had little to fear in the way of interference, since the Crooke house had no near neighbors, were bent on gathering what spoils they could find in the way of silver, before attempting flight.

They doubtless relied upon the fact of having a swift motorcar not far away, to carry them to safety.

But Rod was also pretty sure the men must be coming now. And so far the Chief had not shown up, which fact disappointed the boy more than he could say.

"It's up to us; I guess, Josh!" he muttered.

"Say when, that's all," came the immediate reply.

He knew that Josh must be gripping his club with the same intense eagerness for action that was always a part of his nature. No danger that he would show any backwardness about getting into the game, if given half a chance.

At last there was a movement above. Then came whispered voices, and something fell with a clatter and a bang within three feet of where the two boys were waiting.

Rod guessed that this must be the bag or pillow slip in which the plunder had been stowed. And no doubt the two men would immediately follow it down.

Just at that critical second who should come upon the scene but the Chief and one of his men. Rod heard the crash of their hurrying footsteps close by, and he was so afraid lest they alarm the thieves, causing them to turn back into the house, that he started to waving his arms in the endeavor to catch the attention of the Chief, and warn him to make less noise.

Sure, Rod succeeded in attracting Chief Gallagher's attention all right, but the trouble was the dense-witted police officer jumped to the wrong conclusion.

He could dimly see two figures moving about, close to the house, and all that confusion within

doors must have given the Chief the idea that these were the bad burglars, about to escape.

Before Rod and Josh could say a single word, even had they considered any explanation necessary, they found themselves being borne down under the weight of the burly police officers.

"Hold him tight, Plank!" the Head of the force was bellowing, in his excitement, as he almost crushed poor Josh with the weight of his two hundred and fifty pounds; "don't let him get away from you, I say! Here, you, keep quiet now, till I put the irons on you. I guess we've got you all to the good this time!"

"Like fun you have!" gasped Josh, as well as he was able. "Let me up, Chief, let me up! You've gone and blundered, and your birds are gettin' away right now."

"What's this? What's this?" exclaimed the officer, completely astounded.

Just then one of the other men came hurrying up, having heard the well-known voice of his chief; and evidently laboring under the belief that the desperate rascals were in safe hands.

"A light here, somebody—Jones, is that you? Flash your light around, and in a hurry too!" the Chief called out, as he began to relieve the gasping Josh of his weight.

Accordingly, the officer who rejoiced in the name of Jones, immediately pressed a button on the flash-

light he carried. Then it was of course easily discovered what a sad mistake had been made.

Rod had also suffered more or less of a crush when he was carried down under the heavy policeman. He had wisely refrained from struggling, knowing that such action would most likely bring vigorous punishment, for the man of course fully believed he had a desperate hobo to deal with.

When, therefore, Rod found that he was at liberty to get up, he scrambled to his feet in a hurry.

Had the thieves taken advantage of all this confusion to flee, or were they still inside the farmhouse?

Rod asked himself this question the very first thing. At any rate, if it turned out that they had jumped from the open window, and ran away, at least they had not seen fit to waste any time looking in the darkness for the bag of plunder, because Rod saw it lying there the first thing.

"Turn your light around, Jones!" the boy could not resist calling; "perhaps we could see them somewhere."

Jones did not stop to consider that it was only a boy who advised this. Perhaps the idea struck him as a good one, and really the most sensible he could employ.

So he started to make a sweep of half a circle with his light. It is wonderful how far one of those

useful little articles known as an electric flashlight, will actually send its concentrated glow.

First of all, two of the other boys were discovered close by, hurrying as fast as they could toward the spot.

Then, a little further on, the third policeman was sighted, just picking himself up from the ground, as though he might have tripped over some object in his great hurry.

"There they go, over by the bushes!" shrieked Josh, whose sharp eyes had been the first to glimpse two running figures.

Even as he called out, the pair sprang into the shelter of the copse.

"After them, everybody; we've got to bag that brace of jail birds!" roared the Chief, himself leading the way.

But it was one thing to say that they would overtake the fugitives, and quite another to do it, as the still confident police Head found.

Although they ran here and there, looking, and had several thrilling moments when some one thought he had made an important discovery, it proved to be all of no avail. The birds had managed to slip away. And presently they heard the sound of a motorcar speeding up the rise on the pike beyond the farmhouse.

Still hoping to overtake the fugitives, Chief Gallagher and his men made all the haste possible to

reach their own machine, and go flying along in pursuit. But on hour later Rod was not in the least surprised when the police car once more showed up.

Was Chief Gallagher greatly cast down because of the grand "fizzle" he had made, and all owing to his wretched mistake in jumping on the wrong parties? If he was, you never would believe it, to hear him loudly boast while carrying the boys back to Garland.

"Well, if we didn't get our men, we saved all that stuff for Mr. Crooke. And I'd like to have any busybody say after this that the police force of Garland isn't worth much!"

CHAPTER XI.

A GRAND LOOKOUT AHEAD.

"ANY fresh news of the disappearing ones, boys?" asked Hanky Panky, as he sauntered into the club house close to the river bank on the next morning, to find his four chums already on hand.

This building had been given over to their exclusive use by Rod's grandfather, who took a great deal of interest in the boys, and believed in doing everything possible to encourage them to follow up

good, clean outdoor sports, calculated to make them more manly.

Here the boys had a reading room, and kept several canoes, one a large craft intended for two paddlers. They also frequently stored their motorcycles under this roof, along with that of Rod.

It was a place where they spent happy hours; and many an evening was employed, either in reading, talking, or else "pottering" with the motorcycles or canoes.

So when Hanky Panky, with a great idea humming in his brain, like a hive of bees, started out to find his chums, he knew pretty well where to look for them.

"Nothing doing, that I've heard about," replied Josh, who, as usual was bending over his motorcycle engine, with a monkey wrench in his hand, and "experimenting"—his favorite occupation, for he was one of those investigating fellows, and never knew when to let well enough alone.

"I took the trouble to step into Headquarters, on the way here," remarked Elmer, "and the man in charge told me the Chief had wired to several towns to have the two men arrested if they turned up."

Hanky Panky laughed derisively at that.

"No danger of those smarties being caught so easy," he declared.

"That's right," said Rooster, "they're not going into any towns in a hurry, if they know it. And I

wouldn't be s'prised now, if they just went to work, and changed their looks some."

"The Chief didn't seem to care so much because they slipped away, did he, Rod?" asked Elmer, turning to his best chum, who was writing something in a log book, at the table just beyond.

"Well, that's a fact, he didn't," replied the other. "He seemed to think that saving Farmer Crooke's stuff was glory enough."

"Say, if you asked me, now," broke in Josh, looking up with a grin, from his favorite employment, "I'd say that our bold police, every one of 'em, just heaved a sigh of relief when they made sure the two desperate rascals had given them the slip."

There was a general laugh at that.

"You're pretty hard on the gallant Chief, Josh," objected Rod.

"Don't I know him like a book," the other went on to declare. "He makes a splendid show, with that big body and fine uniform, but only last week he had to call on the whole force to help him arrest that little Irish shoemaker, just half his size, you know he did; and it took four of them to drag Phebin O'Shay to the lockup."

"Yes, that's so," agreed Rod, "but then, you must remember what a ferocious little tiger Phebin is when he's put his war paint on. All the same, I'm sorry the Chief made that fool play, when he

had the game in his hands, and could have gathered in both the men."

"Wow! that big bluecoat nearly flattened me out when he fell on me," Josh affirmed. "I feel sore in my bones right now from it, sure I do."

"That settles it, then," remarked Hanky Panky, cheerfully. "I guess you won't be in shape to take a run with the rest of us to-morrow, if so be Rod's decided to do what I asked him."

"What! me lay off just because of a dinky little bone bruise or two! Well, when did you ever know me to drop out of the running? Whatever you mean, just count me in the game; get that?" and Josh dropped his monkey wrench in order to join the group around Rod, and the table.

"What's it all about?" demanded Rooster, looking expectant. "Any more farmhouses to protect, or motorcar thieves to outwit?"

"Nothing of that kind this time, so far as we know," replied Hanky Panky, whose face glowed with eagerness as he kept his eyes on Rod. "This here is only a little private business, and if Rod's made up his mind to act favorably on my suggestion, it's agoin' to make me feel joyful right now."

"What does he mean, Rod?" demanded Rooster.

"Yes, suh, we'd like to know," echoed Elmer.

"Then listen," remarked Rod. "You all know how our chum Hanky Panky has for some time been deeply interested in wireless telegraphy, don't you?"

"Guess we ought to!" exclaimed Josh; "when he's talked it in our ears day after day for weeks. He's gone right daffy over the same, ain't that so, boys?"

"And always just going to get his old wireless in operation when bang! something goes wrong, and opening day is postponed," Rooster observed.

"Huh! think you're smart, don't you, now; but none of you could have done any better, take it from me," Hanky Panky retorted, indignantly.

"Go on, Rod, and tell us some more," urged Josh, always wanting to hurry things along, after his customary way.

"Well, Hanky Panky tells me that he's now got his wireless station in good working order, and can send messages all right, but so far he hasn't been able to receive any to speak of. Once in a while he gets a fragment of something or other that is being passed from one lake station to another; but somehow he doesn't seem to come in as he should, and he thinks they're too big and powerful for his little outfit."

"I should say, yes," declared Josh, nodding as though he understood.

"And so our wireless operator wants the rest of us to join him in a run to the north to-morrow. He will take along all the necessary material for installing a new station, making use of a couple of

trees growing on some hill. And after thinking it over, boys, I'm willing for one to take the outing."

"Good for you, Rod!" exclaimed the pleased Hanky Panky.

"How much of a run will it be?" asked Josh.

"And say, will we all have to load down with stuff for his new station?" Rooster wanted to know; for that meant a serious proposition to him, since he was not as expert in handling his wheel as might be.

"I can carry all the stuff I'll need, I reckon," the wireless operator affirmed, confidently, and looking exceedingly happy.

"I understood Hanky to say he'd like to go at least fifty miles away; and as we may be out a couple of days, that means camping," Rod went on.

"Which suits me just right," Rooster took occasion to remark.

"And I'm never so happy as when I can see the fire jumping up every time I wake in the night," Josh asserted.

"Looks like it's all settled, then?" Hanky Panky observed.

"Put it to a vote, suh," Elmer suggested.

When Rod did this there was not a dissenting voice. The "Wireless crank," as Josh called Hanky Panky, fairly beamed with satisfaction.

"This is good of you, fellers," he hastened to remark, "and sure, I'll never forget the same."

"All we hope is that you have good luck with your new hobby, Hanky," said Rooster.

"But hold on," Josh suddenly remarked.

"What's the matter with you, now?" he was asked, Rooster being the speaker.

"How can a fellow be in two places at the same time; tell me that?" the doubting chum demanded.

"Been tried lots of times, but nobody ever succeeded in doing it," laughed Rod.

"But what's that got to do with our going off on this little trip?" asked Elmer.

"Why, Hanky 'spects to be along, don't he?" Josh continued.

"Sure I do; however else could my foreign station be built?" came from the one who was so industriously pursuing the wireless subject.

"All right," Josh went on to say, sharply. "S'pose we're sixty miles away from home; and after Hanky gets his new station finished, tell me, how in the world is he going to sit up there in the hills and talk with himself down here in old Garland?"

"Whew! now I never thought of that," said Rooster, visibly impressed by the staggering nature of the blow shrewd Josh had dealt the new idea.

All eyes were of course turned upon the most interested party; but apparently Hanky Panky had nothing to fear from that source.

He even showed his white teeth in a smile as he answered Josh.

"A conundrum, you think, do you, Josh? A hard nut to crack, you take it? Well, I'm magician enough to solve it for you. Just watch me now. One, two, three—now you see it, now you don't—just spell Hanky Panky this way—C. A. L. E. B. and that's the answer."

"He means his younger brother Caleb," Josh ejaculated.

"I've instructed him how to handle the outfit, and he c'n do it as fine as silk," Hanky Panky went on to say. "When we're away he's promised to get busy at certain hours every day, sending out calls for me, which is to be S. O. B."

"Why, them are the initials of Sallie Blanchard's name!" exclaimed Rooster; at which there was a laugh, and Hanky Panky turned fiery red, though he dismissed the subject as though it were a matter of no importance.

"Oh! sure, and it stands for lots of other things too, let me tell you Mister Smarty. But Caleb, he's promised to stand by me, and once we get in touch he'll tell us all the latest news going on around Garland. It'll be just like picking up a newspaper in a city as far away as Cleveland, and reading a telegram from home. But since you've all agreed to help me out, I guess I'd better be going home, so's to get some of my stuff ready."

"Be sure and meet here by nine in the morning," called out Rod, and Hanky Panky waved his hand to show that he understood.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MOTORCYCLE CHUMS ON THE ROAD.

Along toward noon on the following day a string of whizzing motorcycles could have been seen chasing along the pike many miles to the north of Garland. Of course these were our young friends, Rod and his chums.

They had not started quite as soon as they expected. Josh delayed them, because he had, as usual, commenced some little job with his engine, and it was not in condition for use when nine o'clock came around.

As they anticipated being out at least one night, if not more, they had come prepared for it; and every fellow carried a certain amount of luggage along, even Rooster being no exception.

But Hanky Panky was a sight. They called him the wandering peddler, and with more or less reason too; for he had burdened himself with coils of wire, and all manner of things which he considered necessary to the success of the new wireless

station he intended planting up-country, in order to make a test of his home one.

Still, it is wonderful what an immense amount can be carried upon one of these motorcycles, if only the burden is judiciously secured; and Rod himself had examined the load Hanky Panky was taking with him, in order to satisfy himself about the chances for an accident.

They had not tried to chase along at the fastest possible clip. When one has the power to cover sixty miles in an hour, he may just as well be satisfied with half that, and then rest.

When those who came after saw that their pacemaker had given the signal for a halt they were pleased. That would mean a stop for lunch; and boylike every fellow was as hungry as a bear.

Pretty soon the machines were grouped in a certain spot, and the boys gathered to rest a little, before proceeding to get something to eat.

"How much further are you expecting to take us on this same run, Hanky?" Rooster wanted to know.

"And let me inform you all, that we've already covered just forty-seven miles since we left Garland," Elmer spoke up, for his cyclometer told him that.

"Oh! well," remarked Hanky Panky, "that'd be far enough, if only we happened to run across some hills. You see, I want elevation for my

station. A flat country is all well enough if you've got the material to build a tower; but when you have to depend on the dwarf trees we find up here, a hill is the only way to fix it. We can go some further, and keep on the watch, can't we, Rod?"

"Easiest thing ever," was the reply which Rod made, as he began undoing one of the bundles with which his wheel was burdened, and which proved to contain a tin pail in which numerous small things had been "nested," such as pepper and salt, spoons, and the like.

"What you going to do with that bucket, I want to know?" Rooster asked; for it happened that they were close by a fine spring that gurgled from the roadside, and so there did not seem to be any necessity for carrying water, in case they wanted such for coffee, or to drink clear.

"Well, I happened to notice a farmhouse just back of that last clump of trees, as I came along, and it struck me that we might buy a gallon or so of nice cool milk. Anyhow, I'd rather have that to drink at noon, on a day like this, than coffee. And if the rest of you say so, we won't have to build a fire at all."

Nobody seemed to object. Indeed, the day was so very warm that the thought of a fire, and hot stuff to drink, hardly appealed to them; and in this they showed their good sense.

"Let me have the field-glasses you brought along,

Rod, please," Elmer asked, happening to sight the article in question among the other things that had been exposed when Rod opened his package.

It might seem like a useless burden carrying such things; but on more than a few occasions in the past Rod had found the glasses very useful indeed.

"And while you're about it, Rod," spoke up Hanky Panky, "you might ask a few questions about the roads up here. I meant to fetch that new road map along, but went and forgot all about it. If there's some sort of a short-cut we could use, to get over yonder, where there seem to be hills, I'd like to know it, sure I would."

"All right," replied Rod, promptly enough, "I'll ask about it when I go back to the farm. How about the sandwiches your folks put up, Rooster? They'd go good for a pick-me-up lunch, don't you think?"

"Well, I had the same idea in mind myself," declared Rooster, starting to undo the burdens which his motorcycle had borne uncomplainingly over all this territory; though he was careful first of all to brush the dust off, since it had gathered thickly during the fast run.

"There *is* some sort of road over in that quarter," announced Elmer, pointing as he spoke; "because I just had a glimpse of a car disappearing behind the trees. I wasn't hardly quick enough to more than get a peek at it, you know; but I could see that

it was a black car, and that there were three men in the same, one of them a white-headed patriarch, after the style of my own grandfather; and the others younger, though both of them wore goggles, and it was hard to say."

"A black car!" repeated Josh; and somehow they all seemed to exchange significant looks, at which Rod burst out laughing.

"Just as if there was only one black car in all this section of Ohio," he went on to remark, as if highly amused. "We've got that particular one on our minds so strong that we just can't see anything else. But I suppose now, there might be as many as fifty black cars within twenty miles of us right now. And Elmer said *three* men, not two. So, it looks as if there couldn't be anything in that far-fetched idea."

"Of course not," agreed Elmer, seeking in vain for another glimpse of the car in question; "but believe me, suh, it certainly did look a whole lot like the one we saw our friend Oswald come along in, that time we lay back of the bushes, so as to watch the tree post-office."

"All coons look alike to me!" sang Hanky Panky, who was feeling unusually happy, as though one of the dearest wishes of his life were about to be fulfilled.

"But anyhow," Rooster said, "the fact is, there's some sort of road over there, or a car couldn't be

moving along; and Hanky here, is just wantin' to pick up a connecting link."

"Huh! he wouldn't have to go far to find one," chuckled Josh, with a meaning look at Rooster; but even that individual joined in the general laugh, for he was a good-natured fellow, when feeling all right.

Rod left his comrades just then, starting back so as to find his way in to the farmhouse which he had managed to glimpse while passing. It seemed to be nestled among the trees in a pretty spot, and he thought he had seen a young girl coming in from the barn, with her apron held as though she might be carrying eggs that had been found in the hay.

And Rod was wondering whether it would pay to try and secure a batch of these for supper; and if so how could they be carried?

Once he stopped, and looked away off in the direction Elmer had called their attention to, when mentioning the fact that he had seen a car. And a moving object caught Rod's eye, quite some distance away, and heading north, but still close enough for him to tell with the naked eye that it was a black car; and also that three men occupied the two seats.

Even as he looked one of them chanced to turn his head, and Rod smiled to see how closely Elmer had hit the mark when he told them that there was an elderly gentleman in the car, with a white, ven-

erable-looking beard, very much after the type of his own grandfather, Mr. Overton.

Owing to the presence of trees along the road, and for other reasons, it was very difficult to see, and he presently made up his mind that the car would not be apt to come in sight again. And even if so, at that distance there was little use looking, without the glasses to assist making objects clear.

Accordingly Rod once more headed toward the place where a lane led up to the wayside farm. They had seen many other country places on the way, but somehow his attention had been particularly directed toward this one. Had Rod told all that he had seen, perhaps some of his chums would have immediately started "joking" him in connection with the girl who carried the eggs; but doubtless he would have denied that this circumstance had had the least thing to do with his feeling milk thirsty. Rather had the drove of fine Holstein cows noticed in a pasture given him the idea.

Swinging his tin pail carelessly, Rod opened the wide gate, and entered the lane. It was a well-used lane, too, he noticed as he went along. Doubtless the farmer drew all his crops to market over it. And yes, those were plainly the imprints of automobile tires he saw, recently made at that.

"H'm! farmers getting rich around here, seems like," Rod muttered to himself; "when they can afford to own cars like that. But then I know a few

who do; and why shouldn't this man, with such a classy herd of fine breed cows. P'raps now, it may be a rich city man's summer home. But I can tell better when I meet up with somebody."

He chuckled a little at that remark; just as though that "somebody" might be the owner of the apron that held the eggs he coveted.

A short distance from the road, and he sighted the outbuildings belonging to the farm. They were all painted red, and seemed to be neat and attractive; a fact that made Rod think he must have about guessed the truth, when figuring on some city man being the owner of the place, even though a hired farmer ran it for him.

He kept on straight toward the house itself, and found that this was a very pretty building, somewhat after the type of Swiss cottages he remembered seeing pictured in a magazine lately.

The girl had disappeared, possibly through an open door he noticed; and so far as he could see there did not appear to be any man around the barns, though some sheep in an enclosure greeted him with loud "baas."

Rod had covered about half the distance separating the farmhouse from the barns when he experienced a very unpleasant surprise.

There was a sudden series of roars, and a large dog came dashing out at him, showing a set of white teeth, and appearing to be a very savage

beast. And not wanting to have those teeth meet in the calf of his leg, Rod knew it was up to him to do some pretty quick thinking.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALONG THE CANAL TOW-PATH.

THERE was no stout stick handy, with which to hold the dog at bay; and at best a tin bucket seems to be a pretty poor weapon with which to defend one's self against the sharp teeth of an ugly beast.

However, Rod was full of expedients. He wanted just about five seconds in order to make a run over to the nearest fence. If he could mount that, and put it between himself and his savage canine foe, he asked for nothing better just then.

And the way he fixed it smacked of real diplomacy; at least his chums would have said so, could they have seen how he managed.

The tin pail was not used to batter the beast over the head, since it was too puny for such a desperate purpose. On the contrary, Rod had another use for it; and in this particular he must have had a muzzle in mind.

The dog was jumping straight at him, as though bent on doing material damage while he had the chance.

Quick as a flash Rod held out the bucket, and with considerable dexterity managed to clap the same squarely over the head of the dog.

That done, he turned like a flash, and made for the fence, leaving the dog to get rid of his strange head gear as best he could.

With every one of the five jumps which Rod made, he fancied that he could feel the teeth of his enemy meeting in his leg; but nothing of the kind happened; and he was presently able to fling himself upward, the bars of the fence assisting more or less in his climbing operations.

And so he dropped over on the other side, among the sheep, which scattered in alarm. Just then the dog, having gotten rid of the closely-fitting bucket, came against the fence with a rush, growling, and gritting his teeth; but Rod was now in a position to laugh at his fury, because those stout rails stood as a barrier between.

Relief was coming, for he could hear feminine voices, and looking up saw the identical girl whom he had noticed before, accompanied by a middle-aged woman, hurrying to the spot, and scolding the dog.

The beast would not be satisfied, however, until he had been led into some part of the barn, and chained there. Even afterwards he barked wildly, and gave Rod to understand that he had had a very narrow escape.

Of course Rod hopped back over the fence, laughing merrily.

"That was a close shave, I take it," he observed, as he recovered his tin pail, which, however, had received several dents in the encounter, calculated to serve as reminders of the adventure, and which he felt that he could exhibit to his chums as proof of his story.

"I hope he didn't hurt you any," remarked the woman; for it had been the girl who had led the dog away, and closed the door of the barn, after she secured him with a chain.

"Not at all," replied the boy. "I was too quick for him, you see. And I guess I went over that fence faster'n you ever saw anybody do it before. But I was coming in to ask you if we could get some milk to drink, ma'm. There are five of us on motorcycles, and we expect to camp out a night or two. Just now, as we have sandwiches to munch on, for lunch, and didn't mean to start a fire to make coffee, I told the other fellows I'd run over here, and try and buy some milk. Then, if you could spare a dozen or two eggs, and I could carry them, I'd be glad to take the same."

The woman turned and looked at the girl, and then both of them laughed.

"Seems like it must be catching, maw," remarked the girl; but of course Rod did not understand what

was meant; seeing which the woman went on to say:

"We had another visitor just a little while back, you see. Three gentlemen came in with an automobile, and wanted to buy some things, as they didn't know but what they'd need them. Of course, as a rule we don't expect to sell anything off the place here, for we're only caretakers for Mr. Lloyd Grace of Cleveland; but it happened that I could spare what they wanted, and I let them have a home-cured ham, some ground coffee, a basket of fresh eggs, a jug of milk, and two loaves of bread that was hot out of the oven. They were so glad to get them, too; and I felt sorry for the poor old gentleman, he looked so mild and inoffensive; but they said he was out of his mind, and one of them, his son, was taking him to a home he had bought about thirty miles from here. But he didn't expect there would be anything to eat in the house. I was glad to help them out; and I expect we can give you what you want. We shouldn't take any pay for it, either, after the scare our dog gave you."

"Oh! that was only one of the many little adventures we meet up with, when running about the country on our wheels. I wish I had a dollar for every time I've had a dog run after me," Rod went on to say.

He was then invited over to the house, and gladly accepted the chance to chat with the girl, while her

mother proceeded to fill his bucket with rich milk, and do up the eggs in a package, so he could carry them without trouble. It would be another thing, though, taking them along over country roads on a motorcycle; and Rod hardly knew whether he had been wise or not in attempting the task.

What he had heard about the men in the black car did not make any particular impression on Rod at the time, though it was fated to come back to him later on, with startling distinctness.

When he had thanked the woman and her daughter, and insisted on leaving money for the milk and the eggs, he passed by the barns, and could hear the ugly-tempered Bruno still champing his teeth, and complaining because he had been cheated out of a tender morsel through hard luck.

But Rod chanced to look at things in quite a different light, and laughed again at the clever way he had blocked the furious rush of the beast long enough to beat a masterly retreat.

"That was certainly one of the brightest things I ever did," he told himself; as he trudged on, carrying, besides the milk, and the eggs, a paper bag full of country crullers, which the good-hearted woman had made him accept; "and if only Elmer had been along with his little kodak, to snap the thing off, it would have just about filled the bill. I'll have a fit every time I think of it, I'm afraid."

Of course the others greeted his coming with pretended cheers.

"One of Sherman's bummers, and cleaned out the country as he came along, take my word for it," remarked Hanky Panky, stepping up to relieve Rod of the tin pail; and then chancing to notice the several dents, he added: "here, what you been doin' to our nice new pail, I'd like to know? Looks like you'd sat down on the same, and crushed it in."

"Oh! a dog did that," Rod said, in a sort of careless way; and of course, when they heard that, the others were just wild to know all about it.

They laughed long and heartily when the story had been told, and Josh went so far as to ask what the country girl's name was; but Rod admitted that it had never once occurred to him to ask.

"Well, you *are* a nice one," said Josh, with what was intended to be cutting sarcasm; "and after she'd really saved your life by leading that terrible dog away too. If we expected to hang out around this section any time, I give you my word now I'd make her acquaintance, and find out her name. Think it was Florence, or Betty, or Ruth; 'cause those are all favorite names of mine?"

But Rod assured him again that he didn't have the remotest idea what the girl might be called, for her mother always spoke to her as "daughter;" and so Josh had to give it up.

They enjoyed their lunch very much. The sandwitches were just prime, so all of them declared; and as for the milk, it seemed really delicious, as well as cool. Josh wanted to know if the girl or her mother had made those crullers; and after deciding in his mind that it must be the former, also declared that now he was positive that her name must be Florence, because he had once known a girl by that name, and she could make the most delicious cakes of that order any one ever tasted; though these did seem mighty fine.

With more or less joking the boys prepared to start once more. Rod had made a few inquiries, and learned that if they chose to take a short-cut along the tow-path of the canal, it would, after a mile or so, bring them to another road, and save a long, roundabout trip. This new pike would open up a more hilly section of country to them, she also told him, after learning just why they sought such a region, to help Hanky Panky out.

Rod had managed to get the precious eggs packed, and as long as he could keep from having any sudden jar to his machine, it would be all right; but in case of an upset he calculated upon finding an omelette in the package, all mixed, and ready for the frying-pan.

They had no trouble about finding the place where they could turn out upon the tow-path of the canal,

for it had been carefully described to Rod by the kind woman of the pretty farmhouse.

"Be careful, now, how you try to hurry," Rod called out to Rooster, who, somehow, for once, had managed to get in the van, so that all the others were strung out after him.

"Trust me for that, Rod," the other called back over his shoulder; because he did not dare turn his head, knowing that even a small swerve right then might send him into the canal, head-first; and Rooster was not exactly in the humor for a bath just then, especially with all his clothes on.

The going was none of the best, for the tow-path turned out to be pretty rough; and more than once Rod felt sorry on account of having taken it; but then it would only be for a mile, she had told him, and they seemed to be getting along all right. At every bump, though, Rod remembered those eggs, and hoped they were still intact.

Just ahead of them the canal made one of its famous turns, and was hidden from sight by the high bushes that grew close to the path.

Rooster, full of caution, yet quite confident in his ability to manage, went on around this curve at a pretty good speed; but he negotiated the bend in safety.

It was only to find himself suddenly thrown into a new and unexpected tangle, for there right ahead of him was a canal-boat coming, and drawn by two

mules hitched tandem, one in front of the other, and yet almost completely filling the narrow towpath.

Rod, coming a little back of Rooster, gained the bend just in time to witness the remarkable scene that followed.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT ROOSTER DID.

So far as any one knew, that was really the first time Rooster had shown boldness enough to actually lead the procession; and judging from what happened, it would be a good while before he attempted such a feat again.

When he rounded the sudden bend in the towpath, he found himself confronted by that tandem pair of canal-boat mules, with a boy driver walking alongside to spur them on to further exertions by means of whip and voice. Just why no one had heard him before was always one of the wonders Rooster and the others could never understand.

The mules, upon seeing a strange, flashing machine come speeding around the curve, showed immediate signs of panic. They started back, rearing up; and snorting, as Rooster afterwards declared, to "beat the band."

The boy driver commenced to whoop, and even flayed them with his whip in a manner that under ordinary conditions must have immediately reduced the animals to a state of obedience, but which had no effect whatever upon them now.

Then he, too, must have discovered the still advancing, though wobbling monster, for he took a header to one side; while the mules backed straight into the canal, where they floundered, and kicked, and snorted, until any one would have thought a whole herd of cattle must be enjoying a swim.

The man on the canal-boat joined in the row with lusty cries, at the same time running forward, as though ready to jump ashore, and see what business this motorcycle rider had, driving his machine along the tow-path, which was not a public highway at all.

And then the other boys came around the bend slowly, having been warned by the waving hand of Rod, as well as by the dreadful clamor that broke out, that something quite out of the common run had taken place.

They fully expected that it was poor Rooster who was floundering about there in the water. Indeed, there was astonishment in Josh's voice when he suddenly cried out:

"Why, it's the mules, after all; but where's Rooster?"

The others had also been impressed with the

stunning fact that their companion had utterly disappeared. They cast apprehensive glances toward the agitated water of the canal, as though a dreadful suspicion had clutched at their hearts, to the effect that the poor fellow was at the bottom of the watery thoroughfare, perhaps chopped by the hoofs of the still plunging mules!

It was a terrible thought, and for a brief interval not one of them could find his voice, and say a single word that would express his feelings suitably.

Seeing such a collection of the motorcycle boys, the captain of the blocked canal-boat changed his mind, and concluded to stay upon his deck, where, if he chose, he could say what he pleased without running the chance of a personal encounter.

"Oh! where's Rooster gone?" exclaimed Hanky Panky, greatly to his credit quite forgetting everything else in the one great anxiety concerning the fate of the missing chum.

His voice must have carried above all the confusing sounds, too, for immediately there was heard an answering cry:

"Here I am, fellows! Somebody come and pull me out, quick!"

Josh looked helplessly at Elmer, and the two of them turned to see Hanky Panky also staring at the surface of the canal. To be pulled out, in their estimation, could only mean that Rooster

was up to his neck in mud and water, and unable to extricate himself. But look as they might they failed to see the first sign of him anywhere afloat.

Perhaps he might be just behind the plunging mules! Josh had even started forward with the idea that this would turn out to be the truth, when he noticed that Rod, having allowed his motorcycle to stand, was apparently following up the plain imprints of the machine ridden by Rooster.

And so almost immediately afterwards they discovered that instead of turning off to the left, that is toward the canal, it had made a sudden swoop to the right.

Evidently the excited Rooster, in his wild endeavor to avoid running headlong into the mules, had managed to control his wobbling wheel, and finally turn it toward the bushes that lined that side of the tow-path.

Yes, all doubt was now at an end, because they could plainly see where he had gone plunging into the thick screen; and suspicious scrambling sounds also told them that he was there, kicking vainly to release himself from the clinging vines and tenacious bushes.

Of course a rescue party was immediately formed, and upon pushig into that leafy screen they quickly found, first the motorcycle, lying on its side, and then the unlucky owner, who had

evidently taken a header when his machine was suddenly stopped by the obstructions.

With a little help Rooster managed to free his arms and legs from the vines that seemed to want to hold him there; and yet he would not issue forth from the tangle without his motorcycle; indeed, the boy seemed much more anxious concerning the condition of his machine than he did about himself.

"Say, I honestly believe she's all right, fellows!" he exclaimed, in a wheezy sort of way, being short of breath, and having little chance as yet to entirely rid himself of the dirt he had managed to get in his mouth by reason of his fall.

Rod was more concerned about the condition of Rooster himself.

"Never mind the wheel, but tell us how *you* came out of the tumble, Rooster!" he demanded, laying hold of the other's arm.

Of course Rooster was covered with dirt, and seemed to have received several scratches as a result of his passage through the brush; but he declared that there was certainly nothing serious about his hurts. This gave the others a feeling of relief, so that Rod was able to turn his attention to the angry canal-boat captain, and the mule driver.

"Here, get busy, fellows, and help the driver lead his mules out!" he called to Josh and Elmer and Hanky Panky, who, having placed their motor-

cycles where they would be safe, and at the same time leave the path clear, were only too willing to lend a hand.

The mule boy was pacified by a dollar bill which Rod contrived to quietly thrust into his grip; and in turn the man on the deck of the boat was taken in hand. If any one could soothe an angry party Rod Bradley was able to; and under his manipulation he soon had the captain listening, then smiling, and finally laughing heartily at some humorous description of Rooster's many mishaps on his machine.

When finally the tandem team passed around the bend, drawing the canal-boat at the end of the long and stout cable, both driver and captain waved a genial good-bye to the five lads. And some other boys in Rod's place would have considered it necessary on their part to further enrage the canal-boat man by giving him back word for word, until possibly a rupture occurred, followed by a free fight, and numerous black eyes.

It pays to be diplomatic, even with boys.

True enough, with his customary good luck, Rooster had escaped with slight hurts; and his machine was not damaged in the least, save that it showed where it had scraped along the ground.

They soon reached the other road, and left the dangerous tow-path only too gladly. Rod knew they really had no business there, and that they were

wholly to blame for the accident; and he was glad to get off with only the loss of a dollar.

Things began to look more promising shortly.

The character of the country changed for the better. Instead of lying flat it began to assume quite a hilly aspect.

Hanky Panky seemed to like the way things looked. He just knew that before long they must discover the very place of which he was in search.

As a rule the country up toward the lakes lies pretty much on the level; but in places it is possible to find stretches of a different character; and this was one of them.

It was not more than an hour later when Hanky Panky called out to Rod to please order a halt. He was riding just behind the pacemaker, since it was intended that for once Hanky should have his own say in the matter. This was his picnic, and it seemed only right that he should run things as he thought best.

And so Rod looked for a good place to make a stop.

Of course they would not expect to camp right there, close to the road; but it was necessary that the conditions allowed of their pushing the heavy motorcycles up the hillside, to where they hoped to make their stopping-place.

Having discovered such a spot Rod waved his

arm, and as all the others were only waiting for this, they quickly shut off power, and put on the brake, though at the time they were moving so slowly, this latter act was hardly necessary.

Rod led the way up the hillside. It was not at all steep, and they could press on among the trees readily enough, though Rooster did grunt terribly as he tugged at his weighty wheel. He was a little lame from his tumble, though too proud to admit the fact to his chums; but presently they reached what looked like a good camping ground, and here they all lay down to rest.

After half an hour had passed by, some of the boys showed signs of wanting to get the camp looking like something. They had no tent, but a shelter could be improvised by cutting branches, and making a lean-to, that, if it were thick enough, would even shed water in an ordinary rain.

Josh busied himself in making a fireplace, there being plenty of stones around that would answer the purpose; and Josh always prided himself on being smarter about building such a useful cooking hearth than any one of his chums. They were as a rule willing that he should take this duty on himself, too; for there seemed to be plenty of other things they could do.

Elmer was getting together some stuff that could be used to take the place of a mattress. As they had all camped out many times before, of course

they knew just how to go about this in the regulation way.

Hanky Panky had been looking all around, and presently started off, saying that he thought he would see if he could find the trees that would answer him for his two masts, when he started to fix his wireless. Ten minutes later they heard him shouting at the top of his voice, and from his excited manner it seemed as though something not down on the bills must have happened to the "wireless crank."

CHAPTER XV.

PICKING OUT A WIRELESS STATION.

"HEY! something's happened to that Hanky Panky now!" shouted Josh, starting up from his engrossing work about the seat of the intended camp-fire.

"What next?" Elmer asked as he too started to run in the direction of the still sounding cries for help.

Rod was thinking about the same thing himself. It did seem as though there must be a whole string of accidents following their new venture; when one chum managed to get out of a bad scrape with the

greatest of good luck, another had to go and take his turn.

Hanky Panky evidently did not mean that they should fail to find him through any lack of wind power on his part, for he kept on yelling at a great rate.

"Hurry up here, can't you? Want me to let go, and break my back? Be quick, or my arms'll give out, I tell you! Hurry! Hurry, everybody, for the love of goodness!"

The scrambling boys managed to make the spot in a bunch, all but Rooster, whose lame leg caused him to tag behind somewhat, though he was valiantly trying to get there, all right.

"Where on earth is he?" cried Josh, as they came to a spot where a deep little gully lay, separating two elevations sharply.

Rod had already grasped what would seem to be the truth. He discovered that a fallen tree spanned this gully, and that while there were still some branches on the lower side, the upper was perfectly bare, and offered a bridge to any one venturesome enough to attempt the crossing.

Hanky Panky, believing that he saw just where he wanted to build his wireless station up on that other bank, had started to walk across this slender bridge. He must have lost his balance when about the middle; and finding himself going, had man-

aged to clasp his hands around the trunk in some queer way or other.

At any rate, there he was dangling below the natural bridge, kicking his long legs desperately in the frantic endeavor to throw them aloft, so as to get an additional grip above.

Even as Rod sized up the situation Hanky Panky succeeded in thus throwing his legs over the trunk of the fallen tree, and clung there, holding on at both ends, and looking for all the world like a big monkey.

Had there been no broken branches below he might have worked his way along in this manner, and eventually reached the solid ground; but it was impossible for him to move three feet; he could only hang there, and continue to beseech his comrades to hurry, for he must have seen that they had arrived on the spot.

For all it looked so ridiculous to the other boys, Rod realized that it was no laughing matter to Hanky Panky. If he fell, he would have to take his chances below; and the probability was that down there ugly rocks promised to give him a bad welcome. Besides, it was some six yards or more down, and should he even be lucky enough to swing around, so as to land on his feet, he stood a great chance of going lame.

And so Rod lost no time in setting out to the relief of the endangered chum.

He made his way on to the rocking tree trunk, hoping at the same time that it was securely anchored at both ends, so that both of them might not be hurled into the depths.

Reaching a spot about nearly above Hanky Panky, he first of all dropped down on his hands and knees. Then he tried to fix himself firmly there, so that he might exert himself more or less in the endeavor to assist the imperiled one. Much depended on how he managed this part of the business. Once Hanky began to trust to him, it would go hard with both should Rod fail to keep his hold above.

But he managed to anchor himself in such a way that he could lean over, and take a grip on Hanky's arm.

"Listen, Hanky, and I'll tell you what you've got to do!" he said, firmly.

"Go on!" was all the other could gasp in reply, so utterly exhausted did he appear to be from his violent exertions.

"I'm going to begin rocking you," Rod went on to say. "When I think the right momentum has been reached I'll say 'now'; and with the next swing try your level best to drag yourself up this way. Get that?"

"Yes!" replied Hanky, eagerly, for he had long ago come to place a whole lot of dependence upon this staunch chum, and the very fact of his presence on the spot gave Hanky new confidence.

Accordingly Rod started to draw the other toward him, and then let him swing back. He increased the motion with every turn until Hanky Panky was moving one way and the other with the regularity of a machine, but each time mounting higher.

Of course what the boy under the log had to do was to maintain his grip above, both with his hands and his legs; and this was no trifling ordeal.

"Ready! Now!" exclaimed Rod, suddenly.

Both of them made the most of the opportunity when Hanky Panky swung upward.

The other boys, crowding close at the end of the log, had not been idle all this while even though they were rather thrilled by the sight. Elmer in particular seemed to have his wits about him; for he picked up a long pole, crawled over the edge, and going down into the gully, regardless of slips, reached a position partly beneath the dangling boy.

Here he raised his pole, ready to thrust it against Hanky Panky when the critical moment had arrived; and by pushing upward he believed that he might prove of material assistance.

And he was, for a fact; indeed, Rod himself expressed his doubts as to whether he would have been able to drag the other up, having such poor support himself, if it had not been for the help Elmer and his push-pole gave.

With Rod pulling his utmost, Elmer pushing up-

ward, and Hanky scrambling with all his might to make the desired turn, it was presently accomplished; and the imperiled one sat there on the log, facing the opposite bank, panting for breath, but triumphant, and ready to go on.

Rod told him to hitch himself along, a little bit at a time, though Hanky said he believed he could walk it all right, if only he could get on his feet, showing that the thrilling adventure had not taken his grit away. But the others advised him not to take any more chances.

"The rocks down there are as hard as flint, Hanky Panky," warned Elmer; "and believe me, suh, you'd regret it everlastingly if you took a tumble. Better do as Rod says."

"And you needn't just go to thinkin' that it's demeaning to slip along that way," Josh let him know, severely; "because ain't Rod doin' the same right behind you? Where you calculatin' on goin', Rod?"

"Now that I'm this far, I think I'll cross over, and go with Hanky to help select his wireless masts," replied the other, cheerfully.

"Glad to have you along," spoke up Hanky himself; "but I hope it ain't because you think I hadn't ought to be trusted any more?"

"Oh! forget that, Hanky," jeered Josh, preparing to return to the camp site they had selected for their short stay.

"You see, Rod," Hanky went on, eagerly, as though under the impression that it was up to him to explain just how the accident happened; "I was agoin' on right up to when I got to the middle. Then something moved down there, and caught my attention. I thought it must be a big snake; and well, you know how snakes and me never did agree. I must have taken my eyes off the log for just a part of a second, but that set me to feelin' dizzy. And first thing I knew I felt myself slippin' over the side."

"But you had the good sense to grab hold, and keep from falling, which was the next best thing to not slipping at all!" remarked Rod, who always liked to give encouragement when he could, and not run any one down.

And of course, such a kind remark tended to soften the blow to his pride which the accident had caused Hanky Panky to suffer.

"Thank you, Rod, for sayin' that," he remarked, softly, as he started to scramble up the further bank.

The two of them ascended some little distance, although after all, the elevation could hardly be called much of a hill, to boys who had spent some time down among those rugged Tennessee mountains, where sometimes the low-lying clouds would utterly hide the peaks.

Hanky Panky was looking eagerly around, and

presently declared that he believed he saw the two trees that would make the very masts he wanted.

"Just about far enough apart, too; and it won't take a great deal of cutting to knock off all those upper branches," he told Rod, as he slashed the trunk of one, and then the other, with the hatchet he kept fastened in his belt, and which fortunately had not fallen out while he dangled in midair.

Rod himself did not pretend to know much about the wireless game. He could not be up in everything, and this just happened to be a fad which Hanky Panky was pursuing with all his zeal. So he was willing to take the other's word for it.

"I'm going to make that tree-trunk bridge safe to travel over, first of all," he told Hanky; "because, if you have to come and go, you'll be wanting to cross over a good many times before the finish. And it only takes one slip to give you a bad knock down on the rocks below."

"That's just like you, Rod, always doing something to help a feller out!" was the way the other greeted this announcement; and he only spoke the truth, as every one of the other chums would readily acknowledge, if asked the question.

Going up a little further, they sat down to rest and talk a bit, as well as look out upon the view that was spread before them. They could see for quite some distance in several directions, and both boys amused themselves in drawing attention to various

features of the landscape that caught their attention.

"Pretty tame place up here, seems to me," remarked Rod; "two farm wagons are all we've set eyes on in ten minutes; but hold on, there comes the first car along the road up yonder!"

"And a *black* one at that!" said Hanky Panky, as though all cars of that color ought to be looked upon with suspicion; then he quickly added, excitedly; "say, there's only one feller in that car, Rod, but tell me, don't he seem to make you think of that smart rascal, Oswald was that his name?"

And Rod, rubbing his eyes to look again, confessed almost as excitedly, that for a certainty the lone chauffeur did make him think of the fugitive mentioned.

CHAPTER XVI.

AROUND THE CRACKLING CAMP-FIRE.

"WELL, since you mention it, Hanky," Rod went on to say, "there *is* something about that man reminds me of the slick rascal we saw take that letter from the old tree Cale used for a post-office box."

"And the car, too, Rod, don't you think it looks

like his machine?" questioned Hanky, almost holding his very breath in suspense.

"Ye—es, it does at this distance;" the other replied; "but I wouldn't like to lay too much stress on a thing like that. You know, certain makes of autos are as thick as blackberries in August, because the manufacturers turn them out by the thousand."

"Well, somehow I just seem to *feel* that I'm right; and I only wish you had that fine pair of field-glasses you brought along with you," Hanky remarked, as he continued to keep his eyes glued on the suspicious black car that was passing along the road at some little distance, and getting further away all the time, though neither of the boys knew where it could have sprung from, since it certainly had not passed their camp.

"So do I," echoed Rod. "I was just thinking of the same. And you remember, don't you, that Elmer had a glimpse of a car through the glasses that he thought looked like the one belonging to Oswald Walker, the man with a record on the police blotters, as Chief Gallagher would say?"

"Say p'raps it was just this same one!" suggested Hanky Panky, quickly.

"Oh! that might be," added Rod, "only you want to remember that the other had three people in it."

"Well, two of them have been left behind some-

where, and Os, he's makin' for a certain place, on business, I guess. But wouldn't it be funny now, if we did happen to run across that crowd away up here, after they shook the dust of Garland and that neighborhood off their shoes?"

"H'm! stranger things have happened, Hanky," mused Rod, still keeping an eye on the speeding car, which was growing smaller in the distance, sometimes temporarily vanishing from sight behind clumps of trees, but only to come into view again on the further side of the same.

"Yes, that's right, they have, Rod, and to us in the bargain," observed Hanky, with more than a little enthusiasm.

Half a minute later he uttered a little gasp.

"Say, did you see that, Rod?" he demanded.

"The car has disappeared, hasn't it?" asked the other.

"Turned right into some sort of road that we can't see from up here; but it leads to the main pike, all right, that's sure," Hanky avowed, positively.

"But what is there about that to excite us, tell me?" quizzed the other, accustomed to delving deeper for motives than Hanky Panky. "Suppose now a farmer lives up that lane, and that he happens to own a bubble wagon?"

"Oh! yes, it's easy to say that, Rod, but I know you think a good deal like I do right now. I've got

that spot marked with a white stone in my mind, and mebbe now we might find a chance later on to take a little run up that way, just to see whether there's anything in the game."

"One thing at a time, my boy," said Rod, firmly. "You came up here to make a test of what you know about this wireless business; and finish that first before you begin to think about doing great stunts, such as finding the slippery birds who gave the slip to our wonderful thief-taker, Chief Gallagher."

"Huh! makes me laugh whenever I think of that big booby doing anything worth while," complained Hanky Panky. "Why, Rod, you know just as well as anything that if we five had laid our heads together, and made up a plot to capture that Oswald and his friend, we'd have had just six times as good a chance to do the same as there was of Mr. Gallagher doing it."

Rod laughed out, it was so humorous to see the sarcasm Hanky threw into his mention of the police chief; nobody ever dared to call him *Mister* Gallagher to his face—it was always "Chief," and with a capital C at that. The importance of his position demanded a recognition of his high office; why, anybody could be a plain Mister, but there was only one Chief, and his name was Gallagher.

"Well, what do you say, shall we go back to camp, and see how the rest are getting on?" he

asked, and as Hanky Panky professed himself quite willing, they left their elevated position. Before doing so, however, Rod too, had marked that spot on the dusty pike where the black car had disappeared, thinking the time might come when he would be glad that he could locate it again.

They reached the ravine where the fallen tree offered a substitute for a bridge.

"I might go around, I suppose," remarked Hanky Panky, as they arrived at the scene of his previous adventure; "but I'm just that stubborn I hate to let a little thing like this get the better of me. So watch me straddle the old thing, and hunch over, foot by foot."

"You're right," agreed Rod; "because, having tumbled once, might make you more or less nervous. But I'll fix it up so there won't be any trouble for all of us to go back and forth as often as we choose. I've got a stout rope along, and stretching that over will give support as a sort of hand rail, you know."

"That's a splendid idea, Rod," agreed the other, turning to nod his head toward his ingenious chum; "I've fetched a ball of heavy twine, but I expect to need that drawing my wires up when I go to fix my antennae aloft. Comin' after me now?"

"Oh! I'll wait till you're safe over, and then see if I can walk it. As a rule, I've got a pretty steady head, you know, Hanky."

And a couple of minutes later he did cross, without the least trouble, joining the other on the bank closest to the camp.

Smoke rising from below told that the boys had gotten a fire started; and somehow the very prospect of cooking supper in the open gave both Rod and Hanky Panky a delightful sensation, for both of them were very fond of such experiences.

When they mentioned what they had seen to the other three, it created no end of excitement, and quite a volley of questions was fired at the heads of the pair of hill climbers.

Josh in particular was immediately seized with a streak of valor, and wanted to start out on a reconnoitering expedition without delay.

"Say, think what a feather it'd be in our caps," he declared, with his customary enthusiasm, "if we could come back to town bringin' that precious batch of rogues along."

Even Rooster seemed to be stirred somewhat; but Rod put a damper on the scheme.

"You must remember in the first place that it's considered dangerous business chasing after such desperate rascals as those two men are," he went on to say in his serious way. "Then again, what have they done to us to make us want to risk all these things in spying around their camp? They didn't get anything when they made that try at Farmer Crooke's place, because he had his money hidden

away; and the silverware they had in that bag, you remember, they left behind them when they lit out. Besides I've got a little idea that they saw some of us in that light, and must know how they owe the upset of all their fine plans to the motorcycle boys; so chances are if they happened to run across us now, they'd be apt to want to pay us back. Since we came up here on another scheme entirely, and don't pretend to be rogue catchers, I think we'll just forget all about it."

Elmer sided with Rod, and the others grumblingly had to admit that his argument was sound.

So they went on with what they were doing, the afternoon waning, and the time approaching when supper must be prepared.

Rod had managed to carry his precious eggs in safety, so that they could have an omelette if they chose, with other things. The scene soon began to assume a bustling look, with every fellow anxious to have a hand in helping Josh prepare the evening meal.

It was ready just about sunset, when the evening shadows began to gather around and make the fire look doubly cheerful.

"That's a splendid edge you put on that little hand axe I fetched along, Elmer," Hanky was saying, as they gathered around the place where the food was spread out, each as ravenous as a wolf; for the odors that had been rising for some little

time had excited their boyish appetites tremendously.

"Glad to hear you say so, suh," responded the Southern lad, with a pleased smile. "I found that it needed a little attention, because I knew you would have to cut a good many branches away, if you meant to make those two trees into posts or masts. And I've seen enough of a woodchopper's life to know the value of a keen edge. But I certainly hope you-all will be exceedingly careful how you handle that same axe now. It can give a mighty bad cut, let me tell you."

They were soon engaged in the pleasant task of making way with their rations; and not a word of complaint was heard, except occasionally some one would exclaim, "Is that *all* the omelette; and didn't you make any more coffee than this?"

But in the end it was found that there was enough, and to spare; for the coffee turned out so strong that they kept adding water to what was in the pot, and when each one in turn had declined to have "just another half cup," in answer to the pleading of Josh, the triumphant *chef* showed them that the pot was still a third full.

"Oh! I wish it was mornin' right now," sighed Hanky Panky; "because I'm that keen to make my try, a riggin' up this station, and sendin' my brother Caleb word to let us know all that's happened in Garland since we left there this mornin'."

"Huh!" chuckled Josh, "think how interestin' it'll be to learn that Mr. Maybe's started puttin' new shingles on his barn; that Ben Huggins' baby's gettin' a tooth and mebbe that the Aken's dog Towser got a bone stuck in his throat, and come near kickin' the bucket. I c'n just picture all the news we'll be grabbing right down from the air when Caleb opens up communications with Hanky Panky here. We'll like as not just sit huggin' our knees, with our tongues hanging out of our mouths with excitement to hear the next scrap——"

But Josh, who was always "joshing," as his companions called it, did not have a chance to finish what he was saying; for just then a gruff voice broke in, giving the boys who were lounging around the camp-fire a thrill:

"Hey! what's all this mean? I'll hev the law on ye for trespassin' that I will, on my land; an' startin' a dangerous fire too! Get out of this, all of yuh!"

CHAPTER XVII.

JERRY HAWKINS.

"WHAT'S this struck us?" exclaimed Hanky Panky, scrambling to his feet, and casting a longing look toward the camp axe, which was sticking from a tree trunk close by; as though he began to

think the camp was about to be invaded by the pair of rascally hobo thieves they had been recently talking about.

The rest of the boys also gained an erect position. But instead of the two whom Hanky had in mind, they only saw a raw-boned old farmer standing there, whip in hand, as though he might have been driving along the pike when he noticed the bright glow of their fire, and leaving his horses, had climbed up to investigate.

He looked very angry, and strode forward, cracking the lash of his whip, until some of the boys even feared he meant to use it on their shoulders. This they must have resented at once, and trouble would very likely have followed.

But then Rod was not going to allow such a foolish mix-up if he could help it. He immediately pushed out in front, so as to direct the attention of the angry tiller of the soil on himself.

"I'm sorry if we've gone and done something we hadn't ought to, sir," he started to say; and there was a vein in the boy's voice, as well as something about his winning manner that just caught the attention of the farmer, and made him feel a little less furious.

He kept on blustering, and saying his favorite "by heck" lots of times; but in the end he gave gave in to Rod's wheedling, and even consented to sit down, and have a cup of their coffee, while

listening to an explanation of what Hanky Panky intended doing with his wireless outfit.

The farmer lived about half a mile away, and this was some of his land. His name it turned out was Jerry Hawkins, and he read the papers enough to know something about the wonderful advances that were being made along the lines of science.

He had heard how wireless was being used on the ocean, and what amazing results came from having vessels equipped with such instruments. It seemed to interest him to know that right there on his own land a station was about to be erected, from which those mysterious messages would go groping out into space, until they could be snatched up by another operator fully sixty miles away.

Perhaps, who knows, he even saw his name mentioned in some of those big city daily papers, as a patron of up-to-date science; and his neighbors would look envious if ever they saw Jerry Hawkins mentioned in connection with the doing of such wonderful things.

And so he sat there, and drank coffee as long as the fountain held out, listening with wide-open eyes and ears, as Rod coaxed Hanky Panky to explain just how the sound waves were carried through space as far as a thousand miles and more, when powerful instruments and batteries were used.

Of course Jerry did not understand it any more than Rooster did, perhaps not one quarter as well;

but he was immensely tickled over the chance to come in touch with such enterprising boys.

"By heck!" he went on to say for the tenth time; "I'm agoin' tuh get around, and see haow the old thing works, afore yuh leave here, give yuh my word naow I am. And p'raps yuh might even let me send a message daown tuh my darter in Steubenville, her as is naow called Mrs. Simeon Cowslip! I'm right glad I didn't turn ye outen hyer like I meant tuh, fust off the handle."

The boys chuckled to hear him talk in this strain, and gave each other many a sly punch on the sly. It was indeed just wonderful to see how a fierce uncompromising enemy had been so quickly changed into a warm and admiring friend, thanks to Rod's way of handling things. And it made them think more than ever that their leader had no equal, when it came to persuading men, or animals. They had seen him coddle a fierce dog into submission, until it was licking his hand; although Rod had in mind *one* beast he had not been give a chance to wheedle, and that not so very long ago either.

Perhaps some of the motorcycle boys also thought that the old farmer might not have found it as easy a task as he imagined, chasing them off his ground; but then, it was folly bringing anything like that up now, since he had turned out to be a real friendly sort of fellow.

He was also curious about their splendid machines, and examined the same with a great deal of interest. Doubtless he had many a time called angrily after a flying motorcycle, with fire in his voice, because of the scare its flitting past with a whiz had given his farm horses; but then it made all the difference in the world when young friends owned the wheels; and besides, he had always wanted to see one at close quarters; they flew past so like a comet that he never could make up his mind what the precious things did look like.

Rod was more than satisfied with having turned the anger of Jerry Hawkins into friendliness. At the same time he wondered whether it might not be just as well that they seek a little information, while they had the chance.

Jerry said that he had lived on his farm all his life, and hence must know every bit of the country for many miles around. Such a man was as good as a road map, when it came to pointing out different routes which might be followed by those who rode motorcycles, and always sought the best thoroughfares over which to make their way.

In order to get locations down without making any mistakes Rod started to draw a line on the ground, at the same time calling the attention of the farmer to it.

"Suppose that this represents the main pike, Mr. Hawkins," he went on to say.

"Yep, I understands that part o' it," replied the old man, who gave an audible chuckle every time he heard that "handle" prefixed to his name; for no doubt he was only accustomed to hearing himself spoken of as "old man Hawkins;" or at the best, "Farmer Hawkins;" and this way of appealing to his pride pleased him greatly, Rod knew, which was one reason he kept on doing it.

"Well, here's where we are right now," continued Rod, making a mark with the stick he used in lieu of a pencil.

"I gets it, young feller; naow, what d'ye want me tuh tell yuh?" demanded the other.

"Along about here on the pike there must be another road leaves it?" and Rod as he spoke again crossed the line with a right-angle mark.

"Haow fur might that be from this spot, d'ye think, naow?" asked Mr. Hawkins.

Rod looked toward Hanky.

"Would you say some two miles, Hanky?" he went on to ask, thinking it was only fair that he let the other have some say in the matter, since they had been together on the hill when the car was seen.

"Just about that, Rod," agreed Hanky, pleased to be consulted, and not ignored.

"Lemme see," mused the farmer, as he placed one knotty finger alongside his red nose. "I cain't

seem tuh remember any decent road thet yuh could take araound thet section nohaow."

"Listen," Rod urged, "you mistake me, sir. I didn't say we had any idea of taking this road, but only asked if there wasn't some kind of one there. I may tell you later on just why I wanted to know. Please think again, Mr. Hawkins, and let us have the result; a road leading off to the left, perhaps starting in to head due north-west?"

The farmer grinned good-naturedly.

"By heck! yuh do beat every tarnal thing a gettin' facks out o' a feller by leadin' him along by ther nose till he drops to it. Say, ther used tuh be a road right abaout thet same place, though I do guess she's purty well growed up with grass'n weeds long afore naow."

"Abandoned, is it?" Rod went on to inquire, intent on making his point, which now seemed to be growing very warm, and in sight.

"These five years an' more," replied Jerry, promptly.

"How does that come; has the main road been changed any; or was a new one cut in at some place, that made it more convenient?" Rod continued.

"'Tain't neither one nor t'other," answered the old man, with a shake of his tousled head. "'Cause yuh see, this here road she only led a mile er so tuh the mill."

"Oh! then there's a mill up there somewhere, is there?" questioned Rod, beginning to find a new interest in the development of things.

"Naw, not naow. Used tuh be w'en I was a boy; but they quit grindin' grist thar all er twenty years back," was Farmer Hawkins' reply. Many's the time let me tell yuh, I uster haul a load o' cawn er wheat er rye thar, an' fotch home ther flour. Cain't git none like that naowadays fur love er money. It's all white stuff naow, an' not fit tuh eat."

"Did the mill burn down, and was that why you had to stop taking grain there?" Elmer put in, just then.

"Wall, yuh see, the miller he died, an' it laid idle fur some years. Then ther kim along a sorter enterprisin' Yankee as reckoned he cud make money with the mill turnin' out shingles; an' I guess he did, till the s'ply o' proper wood she guv out. Then he quit bizness too, an' ever sence then they hain't be'n anybody keered tuh make another try up thar."

"And that's why the old road's partly overgrown, and forgotten, is it?" Rod went on to ask.

"Thet's the reason, younker," answered Jerry, casting a wistful eye toward the coffee-pot, as though wishing that he could only squeeze another half cup out of its contents of grounds; for it had been

a long time since he could remember tasting such nectar.

"And do you mean that the old mill's still up there somewhere?" Rod asked next.

"I hain't be'n over thet way these two years, but so fur's I knows thar never was any talk about the ol' place a burnin' daown. I guess the storms hes played the dickens with it some, an' fur all I know she may be a heap o' ruins. What was wuth while in the way o' machinery was took away long ago. Thinkin' o' taking a walk up yender, an' seein' the ruins? Reckon they'd make a putty good picter, seein' as haow wun o' yuh hes a camera along."

"We might think of it before we leave here, Mr. Hawkins; and thank you for telling us so much."

But although Rod seemed to dismiss the subject with these words, the look he gave Hanky Panky was significant. At any rate it thrilled that worthy; for now he could give a pretty good guess that Rod had come over to think very much as he had expressed himself; to the effect that that black car *might* be the very one owned by the slippery Oswald Walker, and that the two fugitives from justice were, likely enough, hiding in that same deserted shingle factory!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SUDDEN AWAKENING.

SEEING that there was no sign of the boys starting to make a fresh supply of coffee, the old farmer declared that he ought to be getting along. He had left his loaded farm wagon and team on the road below, and was heading for the distant town, where, as a rule, he sold his produce.

"But I hopes tuh see yuh agin, younkers," he said, as he actually shook hands cordially with each and every one of them at parting; "an' p'raps naow, yuh might invite me tuh eat supper along with yuh. 'Tain't often I hes a chanct tuh meet up with sech an interestin' bunch o' boys as ye be. An' thet ere wireless shebang, when she gits tuh goin' *real* well, I wanter see what happens. I guess naow as haow yuh sorter harnesses up ther lightin' with thet contraption. Lands sake alive! I hope none o' yuh gits hurted. Good-bye!"

Well, it was next door to a miracle, to see how they had made such a good friend out of a raging enemy, who had been in a state of mind to kick them off the hillside, at the time he first appeared.

Josh seemed particularly impressed, for, after

the farmer had vanished from sight down the hillside, in the direction of the road, he went up to Rod, and insisted on squeezing his hand.

"Proud to shake the flipper that has so lately reposed in the grip of the aspiring Jerry Hawkins," he went on to say, in his extravagant way; "and to think how you turned him right around with that wheedling voice of yours, Rod. Is there anything you can't do, I'd like to know?"

"Sure there is," spoke up Hanky Panky right then and there; "how about erecting a wireless outfit that will call down the lightnings from the clouds, according to what Jerry believes?"

Rod laughed.

"That's only one thing that's beyond me, Hanky; why, I could name dozens, if I cared to take the time," he remarked.

"But how about that lonely deserted road, and an old tumbledown shingle factory that used at one time to be a grist mill, at the end of it? Sounds right interestin' like to me, to tell you the honest truth," Josh went on to say.

"It does to all of us," added Elmer.

"P'raps now, Elmer, you'll be sneakin' off some time or other, just to do what our farmer friend mentioned?" suggested Hanky Panky.

"You mean taking a few snapshots of the romantic looking old mill, suh, I reckon," Elmer went on to say, and then turning toward Rod, he added: "of

course I'd like to do the same, because I can believe that it'd make a right good picture; old mills always do, with the moss-covered wheel, the water atricklin' down over the same, or drippin' from the rotten sluiceway; and the roof sagged in, perhaps. But I give you my word, suh, since we happen to know something about who may be keeping house in that same old building right now, I'll go slow about taking chances."

"In other words, Elmer, you'll keep away from there, I hope, unless we should get through here with this wireless business, and decide to all take a turn over in that direction together?" Rod went on to remark.

"I think I will," was what Elmer said, though he did not absolutely promise.

They sat around the fire for a couple of hours, talking and enjoying themselves after the manner of those who love all outdoors. These five boys had done more or less camping in their time, in company; and those who had been green enough in the beginning were getting to know "the ropes" pretty well by now. Even Rooster had managed to pick up considerable of knowledge, and every once in a while surprised his chums by an outburst of woods lore.

They had brought blankets along, and having these to begin with, it would be queer if they could not manage to make themselves cozy for

one or two nights. Of course much depended on the weather. The shelter of boughs which had been erected might keep rain off; and then again there was a chance that the water would find its way through, so as to make them very uncomfortable.

But they hoped there would be no down-pour during their brief experience afield.

Rooster was the first to crawl under his blanket. None of them expressed any great surprise at this, for as a rule he seemed to need more sleep than any of his mates; and they always had a great time getting him up in the morning, even resorting to dripping water in his ear, and making him start to threshing his arms in a violent manner, and snorting too, under the impression that he had fallen overboard, and was drowning.

As they lay under the shelter Rod was at one end, and Josh occupied the other. It just happened that way; but as both were supposed to be light sleepers they expressed an intention of "keeping one eye open," and letting out a war whoop should any hostile force invade the camp during the night, and attempt to steal any of their cherished possessions.

Besides, Josh also stated that he might take a notion to crawl out once or twice so as to put more fuel on the fire. It looked more cozy to see the blaze flickering, was the way he put the matter;

and besides, although it was still summer, with fall coming along, every fellow knew just how cold it could get along about three hours after midnight.

Of course no one really suspected in the least that they would have any visitors, because few people ever passed along that road after dark, so the farmer had informed them; and even if they should the chances were they would lack the nerve to climb the hill in order to ascertain what that glimmering light meant. Country people may be just as curious as the average of their species; but they are not apt to run risks in the endeavor to satisfy their desire to know things. And they have so healthy a respect for a group hobo in camp, to dally on the road when they discover a fire near by.

Some hours must have passed by, when there suddenly broke out a wild whoop that brought the boys crawling out from under their shelter of boughs in a condition bordering on panic.

The fire was still burning, although not so brightly as they might have wished; and what with the yells, and the shrill squealings, it was not strange that Rooster for instance lost his head completely, so that he caught hold of Rod, who chanced to be nearest, and begged him to tell what was the matter.

"Is the train off the track; or did a hurricane strike us?" seemed to be the burden of Rooster's

complaint; but Rod really had no way of answering him just then, for he could not give a lucid guess himself what was causing all this racket, save that it was certainly Josh who did the shouting.

Knowing that a little more light would go far toward showing them the truth, Rod first of all snatched up a stick, and rammed the fire with it. Sure enough, flames did jump into existence, when the slumbering fire was aroused; and these lighted up the surroundings so well that even Rooster could see what was going on.

There was Josh being slowly but surely kidnapped. He was flat upon the ground, and seemed to have a firm grip on some object that was dragging him along. Just as the others managed to glimpse this, a log intervened; and as Josh was unable to mount it in his prostrate condition, and the pulling still continued, he was obliged to let go his hold.

They had a glimpse of some object dashing wildly away, and the loud, discordant squealing stopped as if by magic.

Josh got up on his feet, and started feeling of his knees, as though they might have been rubbed harder than he liked during his passage from the shelter to the spot where the log lay.

"Wow! if you'd only come sooner you'd have helped me get him!" he complained.

"What under the sun was it, Josh?" asked

Rooster, still rubbing his eyes, as if he could not feel sure he was really awake.

"Huh! didn't you hear him squeal, and could anything make a noise like that but *a hog?*" demanded the other, limping around, as if to try his legs after being dragged as he had by the excited forager that had come nosing around the shelter so as to wake Josh up, and cause him to lay hold.

Hanky Panky was bursting with laughter, and he could not hold in any longer.

"Just to think of our brave chum grabbing hold of that porker's ham, and lettin' hisself be dragged all over creation!" he exclaimed, when he could find his voice.

"Well, to tell you the honest truth," admitted Josh, "I didn't hardly know what under the sun it was pokin' around me so, and grunting soft-like. I put out my hand to feel, and even then I kinder thought that p'raps it was Rooster here, tryin' some stunt in his sleep. Then I caught hold of somethin' that gave a jerk, and well, you know how stubborn I am, and how I hate to let a thing get away from me? So somehow I just seemed to close my hand over that object, which it afterwards turned out was the leg of the hog."

Even Rod was laughing by now.

"And you kept holding on, didn't you?" he observed, patting Josh approvingly on the back.

"I sure did the same, till that pesky old log got in the way," the other continued, making a grimace, as he felt some sore places on his leg. "Then the hog she pulled one way, and me the other, till I just had to let go. Somebody hunt up that bottle of witch hazel; I think I'd like to bathe my leg with it."

Elmer was only too ready to make the search, and as Rod chanced to know just where the little medicine packet had been placed, he was able to tell Elmer where to find the same in this emergency. For Rod would consent to go away on any sort of outing without a few things along which he considered necessary; and specially since they had started to riding motorcycles, thus increasing the chances for an accident.

Not only did the sympathetic Elmer secure the witch hazel but he also insisted on rubbing it in, around the places where Josh complained of feeling sore. That was as a true chum would have it; and no wonder that they one and all felt so warmly toward the Southern boy, with his chivalrous nature, and readiness to sacrifice his own comfort at any time if he could do a comrade a good turn.

Apparently, however, Josh had not received any serious hurt as a result of his rashness in first grasping the hind leg of a grown hog, thus alarming the powerful animal; and in the second place holding on like grim death.

He was soon heard to declare that he felt O. K., and wound up his announcement by saying:

"And I guess naow, as Farmer Hawkins'd say, I orter feel thankful thet I saved my bacon thet time, by heck!"

"But did you, that's what I want to know?" demanded Hanky Panky, quickly; "because seems to me the porker got away, bacon and all!" at which they had a general laugh, and then crawled under their blankets again, to try for more sleep.

CHAPTER XIX.

STARTING ON THE WIRELESS MASTS.

"LISTEN! and you'll hear Rooster wanting to know if the river's risen, and flooding the camp out!" said Josh.

It was on the following morning, and the others had been busy for some time. Indeed, breakfast was well on the way toward being served; and so far no Rooster had made his appearance.

Rod and Elmer had noticed the playful Josh engaged back of the shelter, and wondered what he found to busy himself over. Now they knew he must have been doing something in the nature of a joke.

And sure enough, just as Josh had prophesied, they presently heard a snorting inside the shelter of branches. Then came Josh scrambling hastily out, and looking hurriedly all around him. He really seemed to be greatly astonished to see the sun shining, and his chums standing there gazing at him as if in surprise.

"Then there ain't no flood; and the river didn't flow in on us?" he chattered, as he held up a wet arm, and looked at it.

"Whatever is the fellow talkin' about?" demanded Josh in the most innocent voice he could command; but evidently by this time the object of his practical joke had begun to suspect, for crawling wholly out of the shelter, he stepped around.

"Well, I swan, so that's the way you wake me up, is it; turning the whole crick loose on a poor fellow that's just dead for sleep? Better get busy here, now, Josh, and fill up that same channel you dug, or else all your stuff inside there'll be just soaked; 'cause, I hope now you don't think I'm agoin' to bother my head about the same!"

Of course Josh was only too willing to stop the flow of water along the new little channel he had dug with such infinite pains, so as to give the sleeper a good shock. And it is strange to what lengths these jokers will go when a clever idea strikers them. The same amount of energy applied in another quarter would accomplish wonders.

However, even Rooster himself was soon able to laugh over the affair, as he explained how startled he had been on feeling that apparent river of water begin to come in on him. No wonder that he hastened to crawl out, under the impression that there was a flood, his chums had left him in the lurch, and that now he would have to swim for his life.

Breakfast soon followed.

Over the morning meal they laid out their plans for the day as well as they were able, each boy having certain duties which he was expected to perform.

Josh and Rooster promised to look after the camp and the motorcycles. Indeed, as usual, the former had a "little job" to take care of in connection with his engine which did not seem to work just as it ought—no wonder, the others thought, when he kept pottering with it so often; the poor thing never really had a fair chance to show what it could do, because of Josh's experiments, and many changes.

Rod had gone forth the first thing, and made a good use of the rope, just as he had promised Hanky Panky. When, later on, he and Elmer accompanied the wireless enthusiast on his way, and they came to the steep little ravine which had the natural bridge thrown across it when that tree managed to span the gulf, it was found that there was now a taut rope from side to side, just about three

feet above the log; and any one taking hold of this might find plenty of support.

All of them were more or less laden with various things which Hanky Panky said he would need in making his station. He himself carried the coils of wire, and a number of other articles. Now that the time had come to make a start on his latest hobby, Hanky Panky was so full of the subject he could hardly speak of anything else. The others pretended to understand what he said, though chances are he hardly grasped the meaning of the technical details himself, when he spoke of spark voltage, wire cores, armatures, circuits, concentric radiators, the decoherer, and the coherer, from which the flashes of light would come. Still, it did the boys a lot of good just to get him started, and have him rattle off these names with so much glibness.

The passage of the bridge was easily effected, but not without Hanky Panky reciting some stirring lines about a famous bridge in the days of old Rome, which was crossed only after many lives had been sacrificed.

"But then you see, fellers," he went on to say, "they didn't have Rod Bradley around in them days, or else they'd a found a way to cross easy enough," and even the object of this fulsome praise had to join in the laugh that arose.

"Just to think," the enthusiastic Hanky went on

to say, looking serenely upward toward the blue sky overhead; "right now there's a lot of talk aflyin' back and forth up there, that I might be grabbin' down, if only my outfit was ready for business. Hope Caleb, he won't get tired waitin' for me, and leave his place. It'd be a shame now, if we missed that message he said he'd fling out every hour or so beginnin' to-morrow mornin' early."

"That's right, it would make us feel silly," remarked Rod, gravely, "if we actually had to go all the way back to Garland to learn that the baby had cut a new tooth; and that it was actually true there was a new shingle roof going on the Huggin's barn; or that old dog Towser had choked on a bone! For one I hope you get things fixed up before sundown, Hanky, because I'm afraid there'll be little sleep in our camp to-night, worrying over these thrilling things."

"Huh! just you wait and see, Rod," said the other. "'Tain't what comes through the air, but that it does travel that way without a wire, That's what you have got to consider. Just for all the world like you put up your hand, like thet wizard that exhibited in town last winter, and got me started practicin' tricks—remember how he used to say 'money grows everywhere, if only you c'n see it,' and then he'd throw up his hand, and a bill'd be stickin' between his fingers; another dab and

there was a whole bunch of the long green. Well, that's the way you seem to pluck the news right out of the air with wireless."

" A pretty good explanation," said Elmer, " only I hope it isn't founded on humbug, like his business was; of course I know it isn't, because it's in general use all over the world."

So, as they climbed up the gentle slope, Hanky went on to further air his knowledge concerning the science of sending messages on ether waves. He was so stocked up with it that he could talk fairly well on the subject, though Rod had his doubts as to whether the other really understood all that he was talking about.

" There's one tree, and that is the other, Elmer," the intended operator finally remarked, as he pointed just ahead; and on looking up Elmer was able to understand why they had been selected for the purpose of masts.

They were of about a uniform height, and stood just far enough apart to answer the wants of Hanky Panky. Once he had denuded them of their upper branches, he could attach his connecting wires or metal rods, that would form the antennae, these running down to a relay, which would catch the electric waves striking the decoherer, which, Hanky explained soberly, taps the coherer, and disarranges a lot of brass filings by mechanical vibration, producing the spark, or flash, which is used as are the dots

and dashes in ordinary telegraphy along common wires.

"I'm going to climb up this tree, and begin chopping the branches down, although perhaps it'd be wise to get the wires fixed before we cut them all off," Hanky went on to say, as he tossed his burden to the ground, and picked up a pair of lineman's spurs, which are fastened to the legs below the knees, and used to dig into a telegraph pole when an ascent is required.

They are pretty clumsy to an amateur, but old hands can fairly run up a tree or a pole with these spurs on the inside of their shoes.

Hanky Panky had been secretly practicing with them, and believed he knew how to manipulate the things; but Rod warned him not to be too sure, because a misstep was apt to plunge him downward, if his grip with his hands chanced to slip.

"Wait a minute before you get busy," Rod went on to say.

"What is it you've just thought of?" asked Hanky Panky, more or less eagerly; for he had such abounding faith in the other, that of course he jumped to the conclusion Rod must have conceived a new idea that might work a revolution in the work he was about to start.

"Only this," the other went on to say; "It struck me that in cutting off the branches, if you just left a butt standing, it would be a mighty good thing to

use as the steps in a ladder, both for the hands and feet in ascending or coming down. You may have to run up either mast a lot of times to repair faults, and these stubs of branches will be better than all your spurs."

"I guess you're about right, Rod, and I'll sure do the same," was the ready response Hanky Panky made; for he was never too proud to accept advice, when honestly given.

After that he started up.

It was not such a difficult task mounting, and really Hanky found little use for the lineman's spurs which adorned his shoes. He had soon succeeded in making his way up to the place where he expected to begin cutting, and presently set to work.

His manner of conducting operations was in line with what Rod had advised. Passing a ring of rope around the tree trunk, he leaned back in this, and thus found all the support he needed; which fact allowed him the free use of both arms, so that he could swing his little camp axe with a good deal of power.

Several branches had already fallen before his vigorous attack, and still Hanky showed no sign of failing zeal; indeed, if anything, the higher up he climbed the more determined did he become.

Rod, in order to help out all that he could, had made his way up into the other selected tree, and

was busy with the saw that Hanky Panky had carried along, with just this object in view.

Between them the branches were falling thick and fast, and from below Elmer from time to time shouted encouragement, and pretended that the two cutters were working in deadly rivalry.

All at once Hanky Panky was heard to give a screech.

"Wow! he nearly knocked me off my perch, sure he did, Rod!" he shouted.

"What was it; an owl in that hollow part of your tree?" asked the one who was up in the other tree.

"Owl? I should say not; but a frisky animal with a barred tail that looked as big as a pine tree top to me. And he snarled in my face like a regular demon. There he goes, further up the tree; and now he stops to look down and dare me to come on.

CHAPTER XX.

A BATTLE IN MIDAIR.

"I SEE him!" called Elmer, from the ground. "He looks as if he meant business, suh; and I'd suttainly be careful how I tried to take hold of the critter with my bare hands."

"You just bet I will!" affirmed Hanky Panky.

"I want to tell you all now, that I'm not hankering to grab that gent by the tail. Whew! listen to him snarl, would you? Hey! Rod, what'd I better do about it?"

Rod was laughing over in the other tree. From where he clung he could not himself see the little animal that was causing all this commotion; but then there was no need of that in order to place its species. For Hanky himself had done that when he spoke of it having a striped tail, that looked as large as a pine-top brush.

"It's a big 'coon, all right, Hanky!" he sang out, presently.

"Oh! is it?" replied the other. "Thanks for the information, though between us, I guessed that was what the savage little beast might be. But say, he wants this tree just as much as I do. We both can't root around here, so what'm I going to do about it, Rod?"

"Shake the 'coon off," called Elmer; "that's what we do down in Tennessee, whenever we go out after 'possums and 'coons in the night-time. The dogs tree the beggars, and then a hunter or a darky will climb up, and shake him down, so the dogs can have a chance to set their teeth in his hide. Many a one have I sent down that way."

"But he looks like he meant to jump at me; and my stars! what sharp teeth I c'n see in his jaws. I

might manage to hit him with my hatchet if I threw it," Hanky reported from his elevated station.

"Don't do that, and have all the bother of going down again after it," begged Rod. "If you only keep on mounting higher, you'll find that the 'coon will give way, and pretty soon crawl out on the end of a branch. Then you've got the bulge on him."

"Oh! have I?" retorted the other boy; "please tell me how, Rod."

"Well, if he's out there on the end of the branch, and you're up against the trunk of the tree, what's to hinder you from chopping away just as you feel like?" Rod sang out across the space that separated him from the other climber.

At that Hanky Panky saw light.

"Good for you, Rod!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically; "I seem to get what you mean now. And if only the striped-tail makes up his mind to crawl out on a limb, I guess I'll be able to fix him good and hard. Shoo! get a move on you there, for I'm coming up! Don't care if you were the first in this tree, science needs it, and even stubborn 'coons have to give way to the advance of progress. Scat!"

The big raccoon had done a heap of snarling, and showing those sharp teeth of his, but then Nature had not made him quite as brave as he pretended to be. It was done for effect, just as much as a cat's

growling seems to be; for they usually back off from a rival without coming to a fight.

When the human invader persisted in advancing, and attacked another branch with vigorous blows that made the chips fly, the animal seemed to think discretion the better part of valor.

"He's slinking away, Rod!" called out the pleased Hanky Panky; "he don't want to try it out with me after all."

"If he keeps on going up toward the top of the tree it'll be bad," Rod called back; "for he'll always be there to bother you, and perhaps interfere with the working of your wires. I hope he takes a notion to creep out on some branch, thinking that such a big enemy as you will never dare venture after him."

"Well, he's right there, too, because nothing would hire me to do the same. Hey! how about that branch you're on now, Mr. 'Coon? It's the last chance you'll get to make the ripple. Better slide out while you've got the opening. Hurrah! he's made up his mind to try it, Rod!"

"Good! Encourage him in that move, Hanky. Don't let him change his tactics, now he's made a start!" advised the other, plainly almost as much interested in the progress of the affair as the actors themselves; as was also Elmer.

Rod was meanwhile descending his tree. He wanted to see better, and at the same time be be-

low; so that if the 'coon came whirling down, he might have a chance at him with a club; for Elmer was standing there near the base of the tree with a pretty hefty one in his hands, ready to try conclusions with the animal.

Hanky Panky was heard talking to the 'coon, now threateningly, and again in a cajoling manner, as though urging on him the necessity for keeping moving still further out toward the small end of the branch, which was already bending somewhat with the weight of the beast.

"Now he's got as far as he dares go," reported the boy aloft; "and he's watching me for all that's out, snarlin', and gritting them teeth of his to beat the band. Shall I start in chopping the branch, Rod?"

"Sure thing, and the sooner you cut it through the better," called back the other, who was now directly below. "Keep an eye on him, for he might try to jump at the body of the tree when he feels the branch sagging. If he strikes below, let him alone, and he'll drop down to us; but don't allow him to get his claws fastened on you, that's all, Hanky. Get busy now, like a good fellow!"

Thus adjured the boy up in the top of the tree did start cutting. The steady sound of his blows came in regular order to those waiting below.

"Look out! I can hear it cracking!" suddenly called Rod, in excitement.

Then came several quick, short blows, immediately followed by a crash, and a loud yell from Hanky Panky.

"Whoo! he's going down, grabbin' at every branch on the way. Keep clear below, fellers! Give him one for me, Rod, won't you, please; because he meant to bite me if he got the chance!"

Then was heard more or less excitement below, as the struggling 'coon, having at last landed, the two boys who were lying in wait attempted in vain to strike the agile beast. Shouts rang out, and also the sound of swishing clubs beating the undergrowth.

Presently all this died out, and laughing was heard below, where the two discomfited warriors leaned on their sticks, breathing hard, and shaking their heads at one another.

"Hey! did you get him; and is he nailed?" called Hanky Panky, eagerly.

"We pass that 'coon!" answered Rod. "He was too quick for us, and while we managed to hit him a few times, it didn't seem to hurt any. So he's gone for good. And for one I'm not sorry, because he was a game fellow, and deserved to get away after all the fight he put up. So I'll go back to my job."

"Listen! there come the other fellers!" announced the boy who was up in the top of the tree, and therefore in a position to see well. "Guess they must a heard all that row, and think we're hav-

in' a battle royal here with all the hoboes in Northern Ohio. Just see them coming, would you? Rooster he's got a club, and Josh seems to be wavin' a frying-pan, which he must have been cleanin' at the time."

The two chums mentioned presently arrived, completely out of breath. They looked wild-eyed, and alarmed, as though they expected to be confronted by the worst possible thing that could happen. Josh even carried the bottle of witch hazel in one hand, under the impression that either Hanky Panky or Rod must have fallen out of a tree, and might need it for the bruises and contusions that would entail.

When they learned that it was all about a simple 'coon, both boys felt rather cheap at first; but entering into the spirit of the thing, they asked questions, and made Elmer tell the whole story, before they consented to return to camp, to resume their interrupted duties.

"I never heard such a circus in all my born days," Josh told them; "and if you fellows could kick up such a big row over a little thing as a 'coon, I wonder what you'd do if it happened to be a bear!"

"Please don't mention it," called out Hanky, suspending his chopping for a minute, in order to listen to the talk going on below him; "because you'd have seen me sliding down this tree like a streak of greased lightning. But altogether we did have a pretty lively time of it, didn't we, fellers?"

"Huh! that's nothing to the time the 'coon had," commented Rooster; which remark brought out renewed shrieks of laughter.

Finally the two who were looking after the camp departed, and the choppers started once more at their labor of diminishing the number of branches that adorned the selected trees.

All through the morning they kept as busy as so many beavers. Elmer "spelled" them by turns, when they found their arms growing weary; and in this manner great things were accomplished.

When noon came they had devastated both trees of all the branches that were likely to be in the way, and everything seemed ready for getting the cross-wires up into place. Hanky, having laid out his plan of campaign like a wise general, was able to show a little chart, upon which each move was marked; and Rod commended him openly for such a wise precaution. Really he had not expected such smartness from Hanky Panky, who in the past had been a notorious offender when it came to forgetting things, and trying to start on any game haphazard. But he told them that such tactics were debarred, when a fellow was starting in on this wonderful wireless game, where everything had to be adjusted so exactly, if results were to be expected.

As the afternoon began to wane the two tapering masts assumed all the airs of importance to

which they were entitled, after being selected as the foundation for Hanky Panky's "air-groper," as Rooster persisted in calling it. Wires stretched across from one to the other mast, and sustained any weight that the experimenter found it necessary to place upon them.

Then Hanky, having chosen his tree as the one at the foot of which he meant to make his station, began to run wires down the trunk.

He was fairly jubilant as the sun neared the western horizon, and most of the work was done, for they had labored like good fellows hour after hour.

"Gimme an hour or so in the morning, fellers," he declared, triumphantly, as the sound of a big spoon banged on a frying-pan announced that supper was ready, and that operations must be suspended for the night for it was really growing too dark to see very well; "and I'll have things adjusted, so that if Caleb is at his post, and sending out messages from the home station, I reckon that I'll be able to grab 'em in here, and that pleases me a heap!"

"Hurrah for Panky Hanky!" cried Rooster; and the cheers were given with a will.

CHAPTER XXI.

TROUBLE BREWING.

It was a cheerful scene as the five motorcycle boys sat around that blazing camp-fire, and started to eat the bountiful supper that Josh, assisted by Rooster, had prepared.

The talk was lively too, for every one had something to say. Now it was in connection with the success or failure of Hanky Panky's great wireless scheme; and then it would lead away to other things. They even mentioned the possibility of those two fugitives from justice being in the neighborhood; and how strange a fatality it was that brought them all so near together, after they had started off on errands that were totally at variance.

"I don't like the looks of things up there any too well," Rod happened to mention, during a temporary lull in the talk; and as he spoke he pointed toward the heavens.

"Say, it *has* clouded up, for a fact," admitted Josh, who probably seldom bothered casting an eye aloft to see what the weather promised to be.

"I noticed 'em a hanging along the southwestern horizon when I was workin' up in my tree station,"

Hanky Panky broke in to say; "but I was too full of my wireless subject to bother about it. Think we might get a shower, do you, Rod?"

"Well, it's been pretty hot to-day, and right now there's a feeling in the air that seems to spell storm," and Rod looked wise, as most people do who think they can foretell what sort of weather is coming.

"Oh! I hope it don't thunder and lightning any," said Hanky Panky; "because there might be a chance for it strikin' one of them masts, and wreckin' all my jolly outfit, before I had even half an openin' to call up Caleb."

"That would be tough on you, sure it would," admitted Josh; who, while pretending at times to make fun of his chum's attempt to harness the electricity of the upper air currents, was about as deeply interested in the outcome as the next one.

"Let's hope it won't drop in on us," said Elmer; though looking at the dark gloomy heavens he must have felt that there was a pretty good chance of the storm coming.

"As for me," declared Josh, "I'm worrying more about our motorcycles than anything else. In a downpour they'd be sure and get soaked; and think of the job we'd have rubbin' the same up. I like to keep anything I own in spic and span condition."

"That's right, you do, Josh, even if you have to

keep working with the same all the while," Hanky Panky remarked, as he bit into a flapjack that had been smothered in butter, and tasted finer than anything that could be mentioned—for these boys had their camp appetites along, and quantity counted more than quality with them.

Rooster about this time was observed to be chuckling to himself, as though he had thought of something that quite tickled him.

"What ails you, Rooster?" demanded Josh; "you seem to think it funny; but if you have to spend an hour or two rubbin' up that machine of yours, it won't strike you the same way, mebbe."

"Oh! I'm used to doin' that," retorted the other, "guess now, I must have bowled off the road into as many as *four* duck ponds, when learning how to manage my steel broncho. But I wasn't grinning over that, give you my word I wasn't, fellows. All I wanted to say was this: If a storm should happen to come down on us, you just trust to your Uncle Chris, otherwise known as Rooster, to show you the hunkiest little place to stow away in, you ever heard tell of. Get that, everybody?"

Of course they were all surprised at hearing him say this; for as a rule Rooster was the last one in the wide world who would be suspected of having made any discovery.

"What does he mean, Josh?" demanded Elmer.

"Yes, you ought to know," added Hanky Panky,

"because you've been here in camp with him all day long. Tell us, Josh, won't you?"

"I would if I knew," replied the one addressed in this beseeching fashion; "but you see, I'm up a tree as much as any of you. All I c'n say is, that Rooster put in a part of the afternoon rootin' all around this section close by; and when he comes in, he looks so wise that I up and asks him what he knows; but he only keeps on grinning like an ape, and laughin' to himself that way he has."

"Well," Rod went on to say, "it's a solid comfort anyhow, to have him tell us how we needn't bother about any storm. But if he's found some hollow trees, and thinks that we'll hide inside the same, while the lightning and the thunder are around, Rooster's got another guess coming, you understand."

Still that mysterious grin did not seem to fade from the countenance of the one who was in the limelight just then. Rooster so seldom found himself the center of attraction, that he was evidently bound to keep up the air of mystery as long as possible; and extract all the pleasure he could out of the situation, which was really a novelty for him.

"What you listening to, Rod?" asked Josh, a short time later.

"Why, I thought I heard a voice down there in the direction of the road; and a horse's wheeze,"

replied the other, who was seen to be in a listening attitude.

"Perhaps it might be our friend, Farmer Jerry Hawkins?" suggested Josh.

"He did say he'd be likely to drop in on us again after dark, didn't he?" Rod went on to remark. "It was going to take him all day to get to town, sell out his stuff, and come back again with tired horses. Perhaps that coffee is the drawing card that fetches him up the hill here."

"But he also promised to bring us a dozen or so fine ears of roasting corn, you may remember," Hanky Panky put in. "Said he had his wagon filled with the same, and would save us an armful; which I take it was mighty nice in the old man. Why, he looked like he could eat us alive when he came into camp at first; but Rod, he tamed him right soon."

"And while he's here, put me in mind to ask him some more questions about that same old mill up the deserted road, if you please, suh," Elmer mentioned.

"Which shows that you haven't given up the notion of trying to get a picture of thet place, sooner or later," remarked Josh, quickly, always ready to engage in any enterprise that bordered on the dangerous.

"Why, Rod and I were talking about it to-day, you see," admitted the Southern boy, frankly; "and

he half promised to think it over; and said perhaps we might arrange it so the whole bunch of us could take a turn up there in day-time. By then there's a good chance of those two hobo yeggmen being off again; and anyhow, we wouldn't have to enter the old building, just hang around and snap off a few views from outside."

"Here he comes!" announced Josh, just then, as footsteps were heard, accompanied by heavy breathing; and looking in that quarter the boys caught sight of a tall figure climbing upwards, with a burden on his shoulder.

Another minute, and Farmer Hawkins stalked into the circle of firelight, with a broad grin on his angular features, and a bag of green corn on his shoulder.

This last he dropped with a grunt of satisfaction; but the grin seemed to be of the kind that "refused to rub off," for as he went around, to shake hands with each boy in turn, it still clung to his face.

"Glad tuh see yuh again boys, that's right, I am," he started to say.

"Ditto here, Mr. Hawkins," declared Josh, heartily, as he cast a side glance at the bag of corn; and then heaved a sigh of regret, because it was now too late to cook any of that for supper; and besides, his capacity had by this time been about reached.

"Sit right down, and join us, sir," said Rod, waving his hand toward an empty place that had apparently been reserved for visitors.

"We made an extra supply of coffee to-night, you see, because we were expectin' you to drop in on us on the way home, Mr. Hawkins," Josh made out to say.

All these friendly attentions pleased the old tiller of the soil very much. As a rule he had never taken to boys, having none of his own; but somehow these wide-awake young fellows had aroused an interest in him that was surprising.

"Thank yuh kindly, boys, guess as haow I will," he said, hastily, as he doubled up his long legs, and began sniffing the fragrant atmosphere, as though he could hardly wait until the coffee were poured out for him, with the "fixings" added.

"Cain't stop long with yuh, though, sorry tuh say. Late home to-night, an' thar's signs o' a storm acomin' along right naow. An' ef thar's one thing I dislikes tuh dew, it's agettin' cort in a thunder an' lightnin' row. Hosses gets skeered, an' ther's the dickens tuh pay gin'rally. Thank yuh, son, thet do smell right fine, an' I'm pinin' fur a drink."

Inside of six minutes his tin cup had been filled four times. Indeed, it was a fortunate thing that Josh had made an extra allowance of the beverage,

for the farmer seemed to have great stowage capacity.

He also kept up a rattling fire of talk with his hosts, and quite amused the boys with certain quaint remarks upon various subjects. Elmer managed to extract the information he wanted in connection with the old grist-mill, or shingle factory; and in turn the farmer heard that there were several suspicious characters lodged up in that quarter, most likely.

"Hopes as haow I doan't run acrost the same atween here an' my house," he went on to say, as he reluctantly arose, and prepared to leave the genial camp-fire.

"Anything new in town while you were there?" Josh happened to ask, and without any object in view.

"Wall, not anything wuth mentionin'," the farmer replied; "but I did hear as haow there was some sorter talk abaout some taown further to the south o' us; an' one groceryman sez thet thar was more or less telegraphin' back an' forth. Meant tew ask more about the same, an' it clean slipped aout o' my head; 'cause I 'membered as haow yuh boys hed kim from south sumwhar, didn't I understand yuh tuh say thet?"

"Yes, we belong down near the middle of the State, Mr. Hawkins," replied Rod. "You were saying that something had happened in a town

down there that made them send messages by wire to your place. Please try and think what the name of that town was, won't you, sir?"

"Tried tew more'n onct, son, but jest couldn't; but if I heard the same naow, I think I'd recognize it, sure."

"Was it Garland, Mr. Hawkins?" continued Rod.

"Thet's the name!" came the startling reply.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE AWAKENING OF ROOSTER.

THERE was a strange and somber silence after Jerry Hawkins had announced that Garland was positively the name of the town he had heard mentioned, and which was in an upheaval of excitement over something out of the common that had happened.

The five boys sat there, and stared at one another, as though they had actually lost their tongues. An impending sense of something unknown, but nevertheless very dreadful, seemed to weigh heavily upon their spirits.

But this was only temporary, and could not last; so that presently Josh, and after him Rod and the others, began plying the farmer with all manner of questions.

Jerry wanted to answer these, but he knew so

very little that, as a rule, he could only shake his head in the negative, and say he was "up in the air."

"What could have happened?" Hanky Panky kept on saying, with clouded brow, as in imagination he pictured the dear ones at home in some sort of trouble. "I wonder now, if it could have been a fire that took place."

"There was some wind up here, and might have been more down there," Josh went on to observe in turn; "and I always did say that if ever a fire got started from the right quarter, there'd be a warm time in old Garland. I'm glad our house is off by itself, that's right, I am."

"But it wasn't a fire, was it, Mr. Hawkins?" asked Elmer, anxiously.

"Now yuh got me guessin', 'cause I doan't know; but I will say I didn't hear as it was sich a thing. Nobody sez thet word fire tuh me, I give yuh my word," the farmer turned around to affirm this positively.

"What's to hinder it having been a big robbery?" demanded Hanky Panky, suddenly. "We happen to know that there was one not so long ago; and a second attempted, but knocked to flinders through our gettin' on to the game. But it might be in the air, you know. Don't s'pose now, you can remember hearing any talk about burglars and such, Mr. Hawkins?"

Jerry scratched his tousled head, and then shook it blankly.

"Wisht I could obleege yuh, son," he remarked, sadly; "but thet's the time I lost my head, sure pop, and didn't think tuh inquire, tho' my intentions was good. But I hopes as haow it ain't agoin' tuh turn aout as bad as yuh think. An' when I goes tuh taown agin, I'm sartin sure meanin' tuh larn everythin' ther be."

When the old farmer had departed, and they heard him urging his tired horses along the road, the boys sat down to talk it all over.

They were no longer the same merry lot as before this sudden and startling intelligence had come among them.

The worst of it was the dreadful uncertainty. They pictured all sorts of things as happening to those at home. Fire or flood might have descended upon them; thieves broken in to rob; or some fatal sickness swept through the home town, leaving a trail of gloom behind. Then there was the chance of a great accident, either in one of the mills; or on the road itself, where cars were whizzing along at times with the reckless speed seen in all communities nowadays.

They canvassed the situation from every possible standpoint, and instead of decreasing, their anxiety seemed to grow apace as new possibilities arose.

"What's to hinder one of us from taking his

machine, and heading back to this same town where the farmer does his marketing?" suggested Hanky Panky. "Then, when he learned what it was all about, he could get back here by midnight or so. That'd relieve our minds a whole lot. Oh! don't I just wish my wireless was aworkin' right now, though? Wouldn't take me long then to pick up the news, and settle this here puzzle."

"I'll go!" announced Josh, briskly, as he started to get up to his feet.

Somehow they all looked toward Rod, as though it might rest with him to say. As he had long ago been elected their leader, it was only fair that they should defer to him when anything of an extraordinary nature arose; though as a rule Rod himself preferred that all should have a say, and often put it to a vote.

"Hold on, not so fast, Josh!" was what Rod said, quietly.

"But if anybody goes, I speak for the job!" persisted the other, stubbornly.

"All right, you shall have it—if anybody goes," Rod went on to say; "but it's a question in my mind whether it would pay. In the first place, we all know what a reckless rider you are; and plunging along over an unknown road in the dark might land your machine in the scrap heap, and give you broken bones."

"I'll risk all that," mumbled Josh, still unconvinced.

"Of course you would," Rod continued, "because no one ever knew you to cringe at anything; but even if you got to the town safely, chances are you'd find everybody long in bed, and couldn't get hold of any information till morning. Then, if you got back here some time later, and found that Hanky was talking with his brother Caleb right there in Garland, and that we knew *everything*, you'd be sorry you took that long and dangerous ride."

"That's right," quickly added Hanky Panky, thrilled to know that Rod expected such great things of his wirless; "given a little time after daylight, and I c'n get in touch with Caleb. Better drop the idea of trapsin' off over the road to-night, Josh."

"And another thing," started Rod again.

"Whee! you ain't got any end of arguments when you want to floor a fellow," Josh complained, apparently giving it up, for he again threw himself on the ground in his old position.

"I'm sure I heard thunder in the distance," Rod observed, "and that means we're likely to have a summer electric storm before long. Yes, there it goes again; and I saw the far-away flash of lightning, too."

"Looks like we might be in for it, then," remarked Elmer.

"Don't anybody worry," said Josh, fretfully; "it's all right; Rooster here says so, and sure he ought to know. But what you got up your sleeve, Rooster? Listen to the way she's growling now over there, and tell us what you know."

"Why," began the one addressed, and trying to speak calmly so that he would not get twisted up in his speech as he so often did, "it's this way. You see, I've often been told that it's a bad thing to be under trees in a storm; and somehow or other that came into my mind to-day, when I was walkin' all around, leavin' Josh by the fire here. I wondered what would happen to us if a big one came whizzing along here to-night, even if the sky was clear right then."

"Well, did your botherin' about it do any good?" demanded impatient Josh.

"Wait, and you'll hear all about it," the other went on to say, deliberately, as though fully determined not to be hurried. "So I walked here and there, lookin' in all ways, and what do you think I ran across? You never'd guess it in a year of Sundays, I'm thinkin'."

"So much the more reason for you to get a move on, and tell us," broke in Josh.

"Oh! I suppose I'll have to hurry along and tell, or Josh'll have a fit," complained Rooster, who had

evidently arranged the programme in his mind, and was bent on getting all the pleasure he could out of the matter. "It was a cave, then!"

"A cave!" echoed Josh, rather skeptically, it must be confessed.

"Never dreamed befo', suh, that there was any such thing around this part of the country," Elmer admitted, and eying Rooster closely as though he more than half suspected that the other might have been dreaming when he thought he had made such an important discovery.

"Show us, Rooster," was all Rod said, for he began to have considerable faith in the announcement of the other, since Rooster's face was beaming with a sense of his own importance.

"I will," remarked the other, jumping up immediately; "but as it's a little way off, why, every fellow had ought to push his wheel along, so we c'n make time."

"I call that a good idea, Rooster," Rod felt it up to him to say; for it was not often that an opportunity arose when he could commend this chum; and he thought he ought to make him feel that it was a mighty nice thing to excite the admiration of others.

"Let's hurry up, and fix things here, so there won't be any damage done," Rod went on to tell them.

As everybody began to be busy, this did not take

much time. What few things they had along were hastily gathered up, and secured in the best way possible. Some of the boys even made a good use of their blankets to hold the various objects, such as food supplies, cooking utensils, the hand axe, and other things that had to do with the camping out.

"All ready, Rod!" announced Josh, who was always the first to want to be off; because of the fact that he was a lightning worker, and was also urged on by that impatient spirit that gave him little rest.

"Will be in another minute!" declared Hanky Panky, who had more to look after than any of the others, since he had carried such an amount of luggage in connection with his intended work.

"No great hurry, for the storm hasn't started to rush down on us yet," Rod told them; "but I hope this wonderful cave Rooster has found isn't so very far away, because we might find it hard work getting our heavy machines over rocks and logs in the dark; though the lightning is coming along so fast now, it helps some."

"Leave that to me, Rod," observed Rooster, to the utter astonishment of the others; "after I found that cave I thought that mebbe we might want to get there in a big hurry, pushing our motorcycles ahead of us; and so what did I do but pick out the easiest trail; yes, sir, and mark the trees as I came along!"

"That was the smartest thing you ever did in your whole life, then, old feller," Hanky Panky told

him, unable to believe his ears, for Rooster had never before exhibited any desire to do such things as this.

Rod was particularly well satisfied. If Rooster had awakened for just once, there was every reason to hope that such a thing might happen again. Let a fellow who is supposed to be sleepy and dull, just gain a little applause on account of some unexpected streak of smartness, and the chances are he will be a changed boy after that. The sweetness of praise will remain a delightful memory with him, and when another opening occurs he will be all the quicker to notice it.

And so pretty soon they began to leave the old camp, not without considerable regret, for they had been pretty comfortable there.

With the confident Rooster stalking along in the van, proud of his leadership, and every now and then warning the others of some rock that projected so as to threaten to upset an unwary pilgrim; or a log that lay across the path, they left the extinguished fire behind them, and pushed into the unknown.

Louder grumbled the thunder, and more vivid flashed the lightning; proving that the storm was now coming along with increased speed.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NIGHT OF TERROR.

"HAVING some trouble seeing your marks on the trees, ain't you, Rooster?" asked Rod presently, when the pilot seemed to hesitate at a certain spot.

"Why, the old lightning comes so fast, and goes again, that it don't seem to give a fellow half a chance," admitted the other, frankly. "I reckoned that it ought to be this tree I made my brand on; but I'm gropin' all around, and don't feel it yet."

"Well, let's make use of this, and mend matters," and as Rod said that he caused a sudden little white glow to travel up and down and around the trunk of the tree in question.

"Oh! your flashlight, is it, Rod?" burst out Hanky Panky. "Now, ain't it funny that not a single one of us four remembered that we had that same article along with us. And yet see how mighty useful it's agoin' to be, right now."

"Here's my mark, Rod; a little higher'n I thought I put it, though," spoke up the navigator, with evident satisfaction; "and I know just where the next tree lies. Come along, fellows; everything's lovely, and the hoose gangs high—I mean

the moose hangs gigh—oh! never mind what I do mean, for I hardly know myself; but anyway, I'm stickin' right on my marked trail, ain't I, Rod?"

"Sure you are, Rooster," the other assured him; nor did he wonder that the boy whose tongue often played him such sad pranks, should get mixed up while laboring under such a mental stress as at present surrounded him.

The thunder had increased to an extent that it was fairly booming now; and when the lightning did flash it was dazzling in the extreme. Each time the heavy sound seemed to be much closer than the one before it; so that Rod was beginning to feel a bit anxious to reach the talked-of cave, where Rooster had said there would be ample room for all their motorcycles, and themselves as well.

It was no picnic, that scramble across unknown ground in the semi-darkness; for there were lots of obstacles over which the boys tripped, and where the heavy motorcycles had to be lifted by bodily effort. But one and all were cheerful, and kept hoping that all was going to turn out well.

Once Hanky Panky took a little header, and Elmer, who came fast upon his heels, had to stop and lend a helping hand.

"Hurt any, Hanky?" he asked, solicitously; and only a mumble came in reply; but from the fact that the unfortunate one limped more or less, it could easily be understood that he must have received

some minor injuries; not enough to make him own up that he was a cripple, and needed assistance, for like his chums Hanky Panky was too proud to give in easily.

"Nearly there, boys," Rooster kept saying over his shoulder, from time to time. "I remember this particular old tree; and it's just a little ways further. Fact is, we ought to be there in about a minute."

That was encouraging, at any rate. Rod only hoped that after they had arrived on the ground it might not prove to be what is called a "jack-o'-lantern,"—something like the strange light at times seen flickering around through low bogs, and graveyards, where the air is heavily charged with miasma; and that Rooster would keep them in this anxious frame of mind, only to disappoint them in the end.

"Here she is, all hunky-dory!" suddenly shrilled the pilot of the expedition; at which various thankful ejaculations were heard to break forth from some of those who had begun to seriously doubt.

Rod flashed his little hand torch ahead. He saw that there was a rocky butte standing beyond them, and that it had what seemed to be a wide crack running up its rough face, in a diagonal line.

"You went on inside, did you, Rooster?" questioned Josh, after taking one look at the entrance to the so-called cave.

"You bet I did, and with my heart in my throat

most all the time," came the reply; "because, you see, how was I to know but what there might be a bear, or anyhow, some savage wild animals livin' in that snug hole. But there wasn't a single thing in there, though I did find bones aplenty. Let me go first, Rod. There ain't anything to tumble over, because I made sure of that. Train your light along so's to show ahead; and every fellow keep as close together as you can. Now for it!"

He certainly showed that he had the fullest confidence in his examination of the afternoon, for as he said this Rooster immediately made the plunge.

"Slow, Rooster, even if you do know the way is clear," cautioned Rod, who was coming along as close at the heels of the pilot as was convenient; and at that the delighted leader did condescend to moderate his pace a little.

So they trailed into the crack in the wall. It was just wide enough to permit of the passage of each boy alongside his motorcycle. They noticed, when Rod happened to shift the light around, and for a brief space threw it overhead, that the rock came in an arch above, and formed a roof that would effectually keep out any rain storm that could happen along.

Various exclamations of satisfaction and wonder told that the boys were delighted with their new refuge. Rooster's star was higher just then than it

had ever been before; and perhaps after this Josh might hesitate to look down upon the greenhorn chum as one who would never amount to much.

They presently stood in a cave that, just as the proud discoverer had claimed, was amply large enough to contain half a dozen motorcycles, and the owners as well.

"Say, how's this?" asked Rooster, as Rod turned his torch first to the right, and then to the left, in order to get the dimensions of the place fixed in his mind.

"Great, that's what!" admitted Hanky Panky; "and I on'y wish my mind was as easy about that wireless outfit I've got planted between them two trees, as I am over the safety of my machine here."

"Huh! mebbe Rooster might tell you about another cave, where you could stow the whole business away till the storm's over?" suggested Josh.

"We didn't arrive any too soon, either, let me tell you, suh!" remarked Elmer, holding up a hand as if to urge them to listen.

"Raining!" said Rod, immediately.

"I should say, yes, and comin' down in rivers," added Hanky Panky. "Why, we'd a been soaked through to the skin in no time with such a deluge comin' down on top of us. Whee! get that flash, would you? I hope now, it didn't tear things loose over near our old camp, where I've got my wires placed so fine. I don't know's I'd have the patience

to rig up another one, even if I found I had enough material on hand."

The crash of thunder had quickly followed the vivid dazzling flash, showing that the bolt must have struck somewhere not a great ways off. Even far within that crevice in the rocky wall the intensely bright white light penetrated, such was the power of the electric fluid that shot down from the surcharged clouds, toward the object that drew it on earth.

"But let me tell you this hard rock is going to make our poor bones ache when we try to lie down, and get a little sleep," remarked Josh; who could pick flaws in nearly anything, and sometimes made himself a little disagreeable by so doing.

"But we'll just do the best we can, I take it, suh," Elmer told him instantly, not being one of the kind to find fault with a gift horse.

"And every time we feel like grumbling because our ribs ache," added Rod, cheerfully, "why, we'll remember that it's these same old rocks that give us the shelter we're enjoying right now from the fury of the storm."

"Did you ever hear it thunder louder, and the rain come down heavier?" asked Rooster, in quite a contented frame of mind, as became one who had earned his laurels, and meant to wear the victor's wreath on his brow for once.

"I don't believe any of us did; though by the

same token that ought to be a pretty good indication that the storm'll soon be over," Rod went on to say; and as he laid some claim to being a weather prophet, the others took it for granted that things would surely turn out as he predicted.

"And this is by long odds the soundest roof I ever ran across," Elmer remarked, after the storm had continued for some time.

"Ain't leaked a single drop yet!" exulted Rooster, complacently. "I reckon now, some of you must a thought I was bluffing when I said I'd found a cave; but then you know they say that fools and babies sometimes do things that big men never dream of; and while I hope I ain't the first, and know I'm no kid, still, it sometimes must come about that the unexpected happens. It did this time."

"That's right; and we think you're not so very slow after all, Rooster, take my word for it," Josh admitted; which was saying a good deal—for him; but then, when he considered how much this wonderful discovery had done for him individually, really Josh would have felt ashamed of himself if he could find no words of commendation for the one who was responsible for it.

"We ought to give him a new name after this," Hanky Panky told them all; "his dad already suspected that he was agoin' to do great stunts along the line of exploration, for you know he put the brand of Christopher on him; but now he deserves

to be called Columbus, too. Hurrah! for our chum, Christopher Columbus Boggs."

"That'll do for you, Hanky," said the object of all this attention. "You must remember that it was partly for myself I looked up this same cave; because I don't like to get wet any more'n the rest, even if I have explored so many frog ponds. But now that we're here, and got to stay the rest of the night, what's to hinder us from trying to see how we c'n fix our blankets. I'm dead tired, and I know the fellows who were workin' up in them trees all day must be ready to drop."

The others admitted that it would be a good idea, and so they began to experiment, trying in various ways to make as soft a bed as possible. Of course they met with but indifferent success; for a blanket on the hard rock is but a poor makeshift to take the place of a good mattress at home; but then the motorcycle boys were rapidly learning to submit to privations without much grumbling; and they proceeded to extract as much humor out of the situation as possible; and among boys there is always something "funny" to be found in nearly everything that is done.

They had managed to fix themselves, some way or other, with Rod's handy little torch to help out; and he had just extinguished this; when the rock under them seemed to actually tremble, as with a fearful concussion; and at the same time the cham-

ber in the face of the bluff was illuminated as if by day, when the lightning flashed incessantly.

Every one of the boys sat up again, as though impelled by springs; for at least two of them suspected that something terrible, like an earthquake, had started to rock the solid rocks around them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SNATCHING A MESSAGE FROM THE AIR CURRENTS.

"Oh! what a monster of a crack!" called out Josh, as the reverberations died away.

"Are we all here; and is everything safe?" demanded Rooster, who was cowering in a corner; for that brilliant flash had almost blinded him; and, truth to tell, the boy had never been as bold concerning thunder storms as most fellows.

"No damage done, so far as we are concerned," Rod assured him. "But some tree must have suffered, because it seemed to me I could hear the tearing of limbs as the crash came."

"Then let's hope it ain't either of *my* trees!" grunted Hanky Panky, who was not feeling in the best of humors, what with worrying about the outcome of the storm, and the safety of his wireless outfit.

"Oh! there are a few others around here," said Josh, "and chances are, you won't find things wrecked in the morning. Cheer up, Hanky! The sun is going to shine again; and you'll be sending that message along to Brother Caleb before nine o'clock."

"You mean well, Josh," replied Hanky Panky, dolefully, "and it's real kind of you to try and cheer me up; but I won't sleep much to-night, thinking about things."

"Well, none of us are apt to feel any too easy, lying on this hard rock, and with that racket going on," Rod remarked; "but we've got a heap to be thankful over, and for one I'm not going to complain any."

They sat there, talking as best they could between the bursts of thunder; but presently the crux of the summer storm seemed to have passed over; for the crashes came less frequently, and by degrees seemed to tone down, as though at a greater distance.

There was the usual afterclap, as lightning has a tendency to let people know the danger is not yet over. And this was so terrific that some of the boys jumped, and thrust their fingers in their ears.

"Say, p'raps now, it was just this same old storm that swooped down on Garland earlier in the day, and knocked things into smithereens," suggested Josh, as if the idea had just come to him.

Hanky Panky was inclined to think along the same lines, for he immediately went on to say:

"Well, that might be, because, you remember, fellers, that three times now the tall steeple of the white church has been struck. I hope it ain't any worse than that. I'd hate to think of my house bein' knocked galley-west with a bolt, sure I would.

By degrees the thunder became a mere distant rumble. Rod finally declared that he believed the worst was over, and that those who felt like it might try and secure some sleep.

He again kindly made use of his little pocket torch, so that they could get settled, and arrange their blankets the best way possible.

But that was a fearfully long night to all of the boys, and one they were not likely to soon forget. Of course they secured some sleep, but it came in snatches. And there was Hanky Panky fretting about the safety of his outfit; so that once Josh, hearing him muttering dolefully to himself, emphatically declared that unless he put the brakes on, and let the others forget their troubles, they would rise in their wrath, and chase him out of the cave.

After all, it was Rod who woke them up, for towards morning the tired bunch of boys had sunk into a deep slumber.

"It's broad daylight, fellows, and the sun is shining as fine as anything!" was what they heard him call out from the mouth of the cave.

Something rushed past Rod like a young whirlwind, and he managed to catch a fugitive glimpse of Hanky Panky speeding off.

"Hello! where bound, Hanky?" he called after the runner.

But instead of bothering with words, Hanky Panky simply pointed dramatically upward, and then vanished from view; but of course Rod understood that he was fairly wild to ascertain whether the storm had demolished either of the trees that had with so much trouble been fashioned into wireless masts; nor could he blame the excited boy, knowing how much store he set by his labor, and the possible successful carrying out of his scheme.

When describing the flight of Hanky Panky to the others, as they came out of the cave, Rod declared it made him think of the familiar poem they used to recite on the school platform, and called "Excelsior;" where the youth, bearing the strange device, insisted on braving the icy storm to scale the heights of fame.

Hanky Panky presently returned, and his beaming face told the truth long before he could find breath to give several exultant crows, while beating his hands down heavily on his thighs, in imitation of Rooster's habit.

"Everything is lovely, fellers!" he declared. "Never touched a single thing; and the wires look like they might be just as firmly anchored as we

made 'em yesterday. What makes me feel bad is the sleep I lost, just worrying over things that never happened. And Rod, I guess you hit the nail on the head when you told me all of us cross bridges long before we get to 'em. This experience is agoin' to be an awful warnin' to yours truly."

But Rod knew better, and that Hanky Panky would have to pass through a good many similar experiences before he could change his nature; for some boys are so set in their ways that nothing short of an earthquake can arouse them.

It was hard work holding him long enough to swallow a cup of hot coffee, and devour some breakfast.

When the others arrived in the vicinity of the spot, they found him aloft, and as busy as a bee, manipulating his wires, and getting ready to install his "station" as he proudly called it, on the map.

Every one was only too willing to render what assistance lay in their power, for they had an object now in wanting to hear from Garland. What vague news Farmer Hawkins had brought them on the preceding evening had excited their curiosity, and undoubtedly their fears as well; so that it would be a great relief to each boy should Hanky Panky finally manage to pick up his other station, and receive the facts in the case direct from his younger brother.

They had concluded that it was useless moving their motorcycles out of the cave that had sheltered them so grandly during the storm. A better place to keep them could not be found; and it was not so very far distant from the field of Hanky Panky's operations, providing they had daylight to guide them.

Every once in a while the "wireless man," as Hanky liked to be called, would tap his instrument, and upon receiving no response, always scratched his head as if to stir his wits to working; after which he would "shin up" the pole again like a monkey, and proceed to make certain alterations above.

This had happened as many as four times, and even Rod began to have grave fears that after all the other must have neglected some vital point in putting together his plant, and that they would not meet with a dazzling success.

Even Hanky lost a little of his former enthusiasm, and was heard to mutter that he believed that terrible electrical storm of the previous night had cleared the air so thoroughly, that there was no chance for a little outfit to gather in any of the Hertz wave sounds remaining.

Nevertheless he proved that he had a stubborn streak in his make-up.

"I'll get her yet, believe me, fellers!" he said, doggedly, as for the fifth time he started up his lead-

ing mast. "I ain't agoin' to let a little thing like this knock me out, you better think. And right now I've got a idea I know just what ails the old machine. Watch me, fellers!"

"Well, go slow, Hanky," warned Rooster, "or you'll make a bad jab with one of them spurs, and come down ker-flop. And let me tell you, we ain't got a sign of a broom around, to sweep you up with. Please spare us the job, Hanky!"

They stood around, and craned their necks to watch him; though some of their interest must have waned by now; for repeated failures are apt to sap the enthusiasm with which others watch an experimenter keeping doggedly at it.

Now he was coming down again, and just as briskly as ever, seeing which the rest gathered around to watch the next trial.

This time Hanky went about it more carefully, as though he realized the importance of making no mistake. And when there was heard a sharp crackling sound, while little flashes of flame shot up, the boys burst out into a cheer.

"Got her at last, Hanky, old chum!" said Josh, really quite pleased at the final result of the other's hard work.

"Keep still, and let him try and get Caleb!" Rod advised.

When a minute later the flashes continued to come, even while Hanky Panky's hand was off the

key, they realized that he must be taking a message of some kind that had come down from the very air overhead. And Rooster, as well as Josh, stood there in open-eyed wonder, watching the progress of events.

Hanky Panky had never looked one-tenth so important in the eyes of his chums as when he stood there manipulating that key, and holding a strange, almost uncanny, conversation with his younger brother fully sixty miles away, in the Garland home.

And as they watched him they could see that Hanky Panky was growing more and more excited, too, as though he might be grasping the substance of the story Caleb was slowly, and with much effort, spelling out to him.

Once he actually turned his head, harnessed as he was with the regular receiving ear attachments, and looked at Elmer, as though what he was catching must have a bearing upon that chum; and of course the action, simple though it may have been, gave the Southern boy a wild thrill, so that he could hardly contain himself, as he thought of his mother, and the old grandfather who was out of his mind, and doubtless mentally pictured all sorts of evil things as having befallen them.

And finally, after what seemed to be an age to the anxious hearts around him, Hanky Panky

snatched off the attachment that he wore about his head, so as to leave both hands free.

"What has happened in Garland, Hanky? Tell us what all the excitement was about; and why were they telegraphing everywhere?" asked impatient Josh; before Elmer, who was shaking as with the ague, could frame a single word with his lips.

"Why, p'raps it ain't so bad as Caleb seems to think," began the other, but evidently with the desire to soften the blow to Elmer, whom he saw was already suffering keenly; "but Caleb says as how Elmer's old grandfather, who's out of his mind, you know, fellers, wandered away early yesterday morning, after our chum left the house, and can't be found. And it seems that they've learned since then he was surely picked up by two men in a black automobile, that answered the description of the fellers wanted so bad by the police for several breaking-in jobs, and taken away by them, p'raps to be held for a ransom!"

CHAPTER XXV.

PUT THROUGH BY WIRELESS.

THERE was a deathly silence after Hanky Panky had finished making that remarkable statement. Every one of the others was looking at Elmer with the deepest concern written on his young face; for really and truly their hearts were throbbing in sympathy for him.

Rod instinctively threw out an arm and let it fall carelessly across the shoulders of the Southern lad. He was the first one to find his voice, too; and naturally his thought was to buoy up Elmer's sinking feelings with words of cheer.

"Hold on, Elmer," he went on to say, in that brotherly way that Rod knew how to assume so well, "don't forget that you've got a bunch of good chums back of you, right here. We stood by you once before, and I'm sure I voice the sentiment of Josh and Rooster and Hanky when I say we'll be only too glad to do everything we can to help you again. Cheer up! it's bound to come out all right."

"Yes," added Hanky Panky, eagerly, "and don't

forget either that my brother Caleb says that's only what is reported around town, and that it may be a big mistake. He says there's parties hunting high and low for your grandfather; and if he's just lost, they're sure bound to find him again."

Elmer turned toward Rod. There was one of the old-time flashes in his dark eye, and it was evident that as the first shock passed away, the impulsive Southern boy was arousing himself to grapple with conditions as he found them.

"Don't you remember, Rod, what we saw yesterday?" he asked, hoarsely.

"You mean what you said you saw through the field-glasses; is that it, Elmer?" the other in turn demanded.

Elmer nodded his head, and in the affirmative too.

"That black car just disappeared as I caught sight of it, around the clump of trees and the bushes; and when it came out again it was pretty far away," he observed, slowly as though mentally figuring it out. "Yes, and I can recollect saying to you that there was a third man in the car, along with the pair that made me think of those rascals, and that he was apparently an elderly gentleman, a good deal like my grandfather; didn't I say that, Rod?"

"You certainly did, Elmer, every word of it."

"Well, after hearing about that message that

Hanky took in, what would you say now?" inquired the other.

"Seems to me there's only one answer to that," Rod went on to say.

"It was my grandfather, you mean?" faltered Elmer.

"The chances look that way, as sure as anything," Josh broke in with; and when Rod flashed a glance that way he could see that the speaker was greatly excited.

"But tell me," remarked Rooster, who was evidently puzzled about something which he could not grasp, "whatever would them rascals want to pick up a poor old gentleman on the road, and run away with him, for? Ain't they just got troubles enough of their own right now, without takin' on any more? You tell me, Rod, if so be you've guessed the riddle?"

It seemed that Rod must have grasped the idea almost instantly, for he was ready with an answer.

"I'm afraid they saw us on that night," he observed, gravely; "when we spoiled their job at Farmer Abner Crooke's place; and that they've got a big score to settle with the lot of us for breaking in on them that time."

"But about Elmer's folks, what could they want to carry off a harmless old man for, and keep him away from his family?" persisted Rooster.

"Well, for one thing, it might be that they know

how that same family have only lately come into quite a large sum of money." Rod went on slowly to say, as he began to reach out, and clutch other thoughts that seemed to bear upon the matter.

"Oh! you mean them valuable papers we picked up for Elmer in his old home away down in Tennessee, and which his grandfather had hidden under the hearthstone before he went out of his mind some years ago; is that it, Rod?" Josh demanded.

"They brought ever so many thousand dollars, which has been invested wisely by Elmer's mother, acting in place of the old man, who is like a child, you know. And nearly everybody in Garland knows all about that; so you see it wouldn't be queer for those two rascals, who must be on the lookout for all such stories as that, to get on to the facts. And they knew who the old man was as soon as they ran across him on the road, too. Perhaps the idea came to them to carry him off, and then hold out for a certain sum before they'd hand him over. It might be that they expected a big reward to be offered; or else a regular ransom demanded, like they do in these Black Hand cases we read about all the time."

What he said added fuel to the flames, and Josh seemed to be so excited that he could hardly keep still.

"Whee! did you ever hear the like?" he kept

on saying, as he rubbed his hands together, like a miser gloating over his gold; "here slap! bang! we run up against another chance to show what we're made of. Because, I take it we've got to turn right in, and try to rescue Grandfather Overton from those same hoboes—that's what it's agoin' to end in, ain't it, Rod?"

"We'll certainly do everything we can to help our chum Elmer get his relative safe back again," the other immediately replied; and at that the one most interested, unable just then to find words to express his feelings, simply turned, and gave each of his comrades a look that spoke volumes.

Chums may be all very well at any time; but it is when adversity or trouble begins to overwhelm one, that their real worth is fully appreciated. And these five fellows had hung together through thick and thin more than a few times already; so that they knew, and understood each other's value full well.

"Huh! you see, Josh," Rooster burst out with; "mebbe you won't go and poke all kinds of fun at me again, just because I happened to fetch that old pistol along. Looks like it might be worth its weight in gold right now. I guess that's the only weapon we have with us on this trip. You never can tell. When you want one of those things, you're apt to need it right bad, so they say."

"And we'd made up our minds before this that

the two men must be staying over there at the old shingle factory, that used once on a time to be a grist-mill, didn't we, Rod?" Josh went on to remark, paying no attention to what Rooster observed, for he realized that the other really had the better of the argument.

"Yes," the other replied, "that was what we thought; and I can see no reason for changing my mind yet. From what the farmer told us, it would seem to be a splendid hiding-place, because nobody ever goes up that road nowadays, he said. And so, Elmer, it looks pretty much as if fortune was kind enough to us to point out the very nest where they've taken your grandfather. If that isn't the best of luck I'd like to know it."

"What had we ought to do?" Elmer asked, with firmly compressed lips, and a determined air about him that told as plainly as anything could, how his mind was fully made up in advance; and that he would readily take all responsibilities upon his own shoulders, of trying to effect the release of his poor, old, helpless relative, should the boys decide not to assume the risk.

But then, he knew better than to doubt the willingness of such gallant fellows; and it was only the natural pride the impulsive and high-spirited Southern boy felt in his own ability to take care of himself, that forged to the front.

"First of all," said Rod, calmly, for he would

not allow himself to get excited when a cool head seemed so necessary to manage things, and the rest were all so "rattled" that they could not do themselves justice—"first of all, then, Hanky Panky must get in communication with his brother Caleb again."

"That's easy!" burst out the party mentioned; "because I was smart enough to tell him to hold the wire—that is, I mean I made him promise to stick there by his key till I called again, because there might be some questions Rod'd think it best to fire at Caleb."

"You never did a brighter thing in all your life, Hanky!" Josh declared, actually patting the other on the back, as if to place the stamp of his approval thus; which no doubt Hanky appreciated to the full, for he grinned happily.

"Then after I get Caleb agoin' again, what ought I tell him, Rod?" asked the wireless operator, as he turned once more to his instrument, and prepared to tap the key that had responded so nobly before.

"Well, as it takes so long to send a message, and make sure that he's caught it correctly, you must make it as short as you can," Rod advised him.

"Tell me what you think I ought to say, and I'll transmit the same," Hanky continued, "I'm ready for business at the old stand."

"About this, then," the other went on to say.

"Tell him that we know where those two men are hiding up here in the deserted shingle factory—Ruskins Mill it is called, so the farmer said. Tell him that we also think they have Elmer's grandfather in their charge; and that we want him to wire the Chief of Police up in Painesville to send a posse of officers right away, to arrest the rascals. Your brother is a smart boy, I know, Hanky Panky, and he'll surely understand."

"One thing I want to know, Rod, before I begin," the other said.

"Yes, what's that now, Hanky?"

"Ought Caleb go to our Chief Gallagher, and get him to send the telegram or get the Painesville people on the long-distance 'phone; or should he do that himself?" was the problem that the operator now put up to the leader of the motorcycle boys.

Rod was in a quandary. He knew the faculty the Chief had for mixing things; and how often in his desire to shine as a big man, he failed to properly grasp the opportunities that presented themselves to him. But on the other hand, if the message came through official sources it would be more likely to receive the attention of the police authorities at Painesville.

So he decided on his course.

"Tell him to go to the Chief, and make sure that he sends word to Painesville; and that's all,

Hanky. Now get busy again, and success to you!" Rod remarked.

So the flashes again accompanied those sharp cracklings and reports, and they could see that Hanky was "talking" once more with his brother. Minutes dragged along, and Elmer was getting very impatient; but evidently Hanky was repeating his instructions, in order that the other operator might make no mistake.

Fully fifteen minutes, perhaps even more, must have slipped by, when suddenly Hanky closed the conversation, switched off, and turned a smiling face toward his comrades as he announced with a tinge of pardonable pride:

"I've done it, fellers, and Caleb repeated the message back to me word for word. Made sure he got the same to a dot and a dash; and right now he's on his way over to Headquarters to interest Chief Gallagher, and see that he gets the police up here at Painesville on the long-distance. It's all right, Elmer; and make up your mind we'll get your grandfather safe and sound before many hours. Whee!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

FOR THE SAKE OF A CHUM.

"HOLD on, you ain't agoin' to faint, I hope, Hanky?" cried Rooster, as the exhausted operator fell back.

"Course I'm not, Rooster!" came the indignant reply; "but I'm all in, and want to lie down and rest a few minutes. And while I'm gettin' over that long siege, why, Rod and the rest of you might be mappin' out our plan of campaign; because I just guess that we'll want to be starting over in the direction of that old shingle factory right soon now."

"Then it's the concensus of opinion, is it," asked Josh, eagerly, "that we won't hang around here, waiting for the officers to arrive? Glad to know the same. And between us, I just reckon it's the wisest course we could follow; because, you see, how'd they know we were here, when Caleb only mentions the mill over the wire? Rod, we'd sure like to hear from you on the subject."

"Yes, tell us how, Rod," continued Rooster.

Rod must have been considering things before

that, for he wasted no time at all in speaking up. And as usual, what he said was direct, and to the point, too.

"First of all, then, fellows, I take it for granted that if we start out in the direction of the shingle factory, we won't want to try and ride our wheels. It isn't so very far to where that side road turns off the main pike; and from what the old farmer said, we'd only have a mile or so to tramp after that; and as we know what abandoned roads are apt to be like, the chances are we'd have to push the machines along, anyhow."

"But suppose we leave them behind, will some one have to stay and watch the old things?"

It was Rooster who put this question. He had a reason for wanting to know, because on a former occasion, which they all must remember very plainly, it had been the hard luck to have that duty given over to his charge, so that he missed quite a little excitement thereby. And while Rooster as a rule was not the one to spend much time searching for opportunities whereby a thrill would follow, he did not like to find himself the only one left out in the cold when fortune sent favors their way.

"I see no reason why that would have to follow," Rod made answer, smiling at the same time, for he could read between the lines, and knew just why the other wanted to know. "They're safe and sound where they lie right now, in the fine cave

that you found for us, Rooster. They can stay there until we want them, to return to Garland on. So put that out of your mind, once and for good. We'll make this trip on Shank's mare, which means afoot!"

"All right, and glad to know it, Rod!" cried the pleased and relieved Rooster.

"And what's next?" asked Josh, evidently thinking that they were very slow about getting things started; for it was his usual habit to do his duties without giving them any thought whatever beforehand; and as a consequence, making a bungle out of many of them.

"We won't have a chance to cook anything to eat, so we'd better each one make up a snack to carry along in his pocket," Rod advised; for there could be no telling how long they might be lying in wait near the old mill, before the officers arrived; and Rod, being a boy himself, knew only too well how clamorous appetites may prove to be when not taken care of properly.

"Plenty of sandwiches left," announced Josh, who had charge of the commissary department on this run, and was in a position to say; "and there's that package of cold, sliced chicken, and ham too. No trouble about makin' up what we'll want to take along with us, Rod."

"Then again, we must consider that this is a pretty serious business," the leader observed, es-

pecially for the consideration of Josh, who so often gave evidence of wanting to play practical pranks.

"Yes, I get on to that, Rod," Josh admitted, taking the hint at once; for he had seen the way the other shot a glance in his direction when speaking.

"We've just got to act as though we were soldiers, and trying to spy on the always vigilant enemy," continued Rod, talking in his customary matter-of-fact tone, and not trying to assume any airs in the least. "Of course, there's no telling just what we can do till we get on the ground. And it may turn out that we'll decide it's best not to make any sort of a move; just wait for those officers to come along; and meanwhile keep watch that our birds don't fly away."

"Say, seems to me this ought to remind us of another experience we once had, when we chased after them bank burglars, and had a hand in gettin' back all the papers'n money they'd hooked from the Garland institution," Josh remarked.

"It is something like that," Rod allowed; "only this time it's Grandfather Overton that's in danger, and not the funds of the bank. That was in a shack, too, and now we're going to find our work cut out for us under the roof of an old shingle mill. But one thing I think we'll all agree on, and that's about these men being even harder cases than the others were."

"I only hope we'll have the same grand good

luck," breathed Elmer, softly; and the other boys could easily understand why he should say that; for his devotion to his harmless grandfather was well known; and the thought of evil coming upon the snow-white head of the one who was like a child in his helplessness must stab the whole-souled boy to the heart.

"We will make sure of that, Elmer," was the positive way Rod bolstered up the drooping spirits of his chum; whose fears were magnified undoubtedly by the fact that it was his relative who had been kidnapped by these bad men.

"Well, do we get busy now?" Josh wanted to know.

There was really no reason for any hurry, since it looked as though even after they had reached the shingle factory, they must spend much time prowling around, taking sly peeps at the place, and waiting for help to arrive. But then, the other three understood how Elmer, and Josh too, wanted to be on the move, and doing something; and they themselves were not averse to making the start.

Hanky Panky cast several proud looks upward toward where the crossed wires proclaimed the presence of a real wireless station. He felt that he had reason to hold his head up, and feel satisfied with his work. Things had gone off with even better results than his fondest hopes had anticipated. And then the startling message that had come down to them

from the empty void of space above, did not that wonderful intelligence repay him ten-fold for all the money, anxiety and labor he had expended on his wireless scheme? Hanky thought it did. He almost hated to leave the sacred spot that had witnessed his stupendous triumph. And already he had it in his mind to influence Elmer, perhaps later on, to snap off several views of the two noble masts, with their crowns of wires, arranged in the cunning device known to wireless operators the world over.

What wonderful visions may have been flashing through the mind of Hanky Panky, with regard to possible future conquests of the upper air currents, no one could guess; but doubtless he did indulge in many such, as does every wide-awake boy, when first he finds that he had been able to harness the lightnings to do his will.

They proceeded every one to make himself what Rod had called a "snack," a term that possibly Elmer had introduced among his associates, because it is in vogue all through the South, from Virginia down to the Gulf. It usually means a lunch to be carried in the pocket; though the old "mammy" women who solicit patronage, when trains stop at smaller stations below Mason and Dixon's line, offer a leg of fried chicken, and a slice or two of bread under that guise of a "snack."

"I'm ready," announced Josh; for of course he was the first one to get fixed up.

But the others were not far behind, Rooster being the last to declare that his lunch was safely put up, and that he hoped he had taken enough to keep him from the awful pangs of starvation; a condition that was frequently staring him in the face when meal-time drew near, and he could see no signs of anything being done toward getting one ready.

"I s'pose we'll miss our fine coffee," remarked Hanky Panky, pensively; "but then we'd be glad to give up a lot more'n that for the sake of helpin' Elmer out."

"Huh! mebbe you'll all just envy *me,* then, when you see how I poured some that was left in the coffee-pot into this bottle that I'm carryin' in my pocket," and Rooster tapped a bulging side of his leather jacket as he said this.

"Well, I like that, now," snorted Josh; "just meanin' to make us all suck our thumbs, and look at you enjoyin' yourself, ain't you? Why, for two cents, Rooster, I'd like to sneak that same bottle out of your pocket, and empty it at three gulps. But never mind gettin' huffy, now, 'cause I ain't goin' to do the same. There's Rod ready to strike out, and wantin' to give us all a last word of warnin' so to speak; so come along, Rooster, you and your old coffee bottle."

Rod looked them over, and smiled. He could see from the way their pockets stuck out, that every fellow was pretty well provided with food to last

him over the balance of that day, at least. And when night came on, they might reasonably hope to be ready to come back again to the old camp, for one more stop before returning home.

"Now, it would be easier for us to go right along the road, of course," was the way Rod put the matter up to his chums; "but we've got to keep our eyes about us all the while, so as not to be caught unawares. For how can we tell whether one of those rascals mightn't come on us at any time, either on foot, or in the car? The tall man went off yesterday, and we didn't notice him come back again. I was thinking that perhaps he may have taken a run to some town away off to the east, so as to send some sort of message to Elmer's folks in Garland, offering to produce the old gentleman if a certain sum was promised."

"Sounds like there might be something in that, Rod," Josh admitted.

"Well, whether there is or not, we don't want to be seen; and wherever we can do it, I think we'd be wise to keep back among the trees, as we follow the pike along to where the other road leaves it," Rod continued, in his wise way.

No one ventured to question his good judgment, for in truth they could readily see where such caution would pay in the end.

Accordingly, they gave one last look at the wireless station which had brought them such a stunning

message from Garland, and then strode away, making down the slope toward where they might come upon the pike.

And every fellow's heart beat high with a hope that once again the smiles of Fortune would look down upon their efforts; for if a good cause had anything to do with the bringing about of success, surely they could count on that inducement now, since they were enlisting in an enterprise that stood for everything that was noble and self-sacrificing.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DESERTED SHINGLE FACTORY.

A SHORT time later, and they were shuffling along in single file, keeping close to the pike, yet taking advantage of whatever shelter the neighboring woods offered them in the way of trees and bushes.

In and out Rod led them, sometimes leaving the vicinity of the road for a brief time; but only to come back to it again a little later, as it happened that the conditions allowed.

Somehow this sort of thing just appealed to the nature of these boys, who loved all outdoors so much, and everything that went with an outing. Rooster pictured himself wearing the highly-colored feathers of a big Indian chief, and following the trail of some rival tribe, against whose village an expedition may have been formed. And he kept looking around pretty much all the time, in about the way he imagined a genuine redskin would be apt to do, always on the alert for danger.

Birds and red squirrels they disturbed in their advance. Now a jolly little nutcracker would bark saucily at the intruders on his domain; then perhaps

a chattering bluejay, pausing to look them over, would let them plainly understand in bird language that they were unwelcome guests, and had better not wait upon the order of their going. Or again, it might have been a cottontail that suddenly darted out from a bunch of dead grass, and dared them to follow by stopping a short distance away, as if to tantalize them into a chase.

But Rod knew only too well that the cunning rabbit must have a nest of young ones hidden near by, and that she was thus playing lame in order to excite them into giving chase; when a sufficient distance had been covered to insure the safety of the brood, it would be astonishing how speedily she would vanish, having miraculously recovered.

Rod knew this because he had always made it his business to study the habits of birds and animals; and had he not seen more than once a mother partridge flutter temptingly across his path, as if with a broken wing; and stepping into the brush from whence she came, had he not always flushed a brood of fledglings, perhaps only able to run, and not fly?

All the while they were making good progress, and the abandoned road leading up to the old shingle factory could not be very much farther on.

Indeed, Rod was anticipating seeing it at any moment now; and had even turned to say as much

in a low tone to the next one in line, when his ear caught the unmistakable sound of a car coming from some quarter, he could not at first decide which.

Now, before starting out on this expedition, they had arranged between them a little but effective code of signals that every one was to keep his ears open for.

Rod instantly gave a low whistle that could easily have been mistaken for the cheery note of a young quail, sitting on a fence rail, and trying to fashion the usual "Bob White" of his species.

Instantly every fellow "ducked," as Josh called it; that is, he dropped flat on his face, and hugged the ground. When he cautiously raised his head a few inches, Rod could see that the car was coming along the road further on. It turned in when about fifty yards from the spot where the five motorcycle boys were crouching amidst the brush, like startled game birds on hearing the pat-pat of the dog's paddling feet among the dead leaves.

After it had utterly disappeared, and they could hear it pushing on in the depth of the woods, the boys allowed themselves to rise up again.

"A close shave, believe me if it wasn't," remarked Josh, with a satisfied chuckle of amusement, for this sort of thing pleased him more than words could tell.

"Did you get a good look at him, Rod?" asked Rooster, who had not himself ventured to lift his

head, after once falling flat, for fear lest he be discovered.

"Yes, I did, just as he turned in; and he was so taken up with guiding his car that he never glanced this way once," was the other's reply.

"And," Elmer went on to ask, hastily and eagerly, "was it either one of the two rascals we ran up against the other day?"

Rod hesitated before replying to this pertinent question.

"Yes, I feel pretty sure it was," he finally said; "although the fellow has gone to a whole lot of trouble to change his looks. But there is a way he has of holding his head on the left side; I noticed it that other time, and I could see the same thing right now."

"Do you mean he's gone and adopted a genuine disguise, Rod?" asked Rooster.

"Looked like it, to me," came the reply. "If they believe the whole country has been posted with a description of their appearance, as is likely, you can understand why this fellow would want to look as different as he could make himself, when he had to run over to some town to send a message of some kind, perhaps to Elmer's people, for all we know."

And again there was no dissenting opinion; in fact, it would seem that Rod had a faculty for voicing the mind of each and every chum about him. Nor was this caused by the fact that these others

had no opinion of their own, for as a rule they were very decided in their views. But Rod was generally so correct in his diagnosis, that they saw it just as he described.

"And do we start in after him?" asked Hanky Panky.

"Yes," answered Rod. "We know where he is, and that there's little chance of him happening on us unawares; but all the same I think we'll be just as careful."

"Sure thing," said Rooster. "Suppose, now, he just thought he saw something moving over here, when we dropped down? Perhaps he'd be too smart to show it, but wouldn't he be apt to stop, after he'd gone some little distance, and sneak back to watch?"

"Listen to what Rooster's sayin', would you?" exclaimed Josh, really taken aback by such shrewd reasoning on the part of the one he had up to lately looked upon as a mere tyro or greenhorn.

Rod said nothing, but he did manage to give Rooster a reassuring nod, as though to inform him that his reasoning was sound; and that was one of the main ideas in their keeping on the alert constantly, no matter how much it looked as though they had nothing to fear.

So they turned into the woods a little deeper, for they were already on the side where the abandoned road to the shingle factory ran. And having come upon this latter, Rod began pursuing the same

system of tactics that had been so successfully carried out before.

It was not hard work advancing, because the cover was plentiful. They had lost sight of the road, and one or two of the boys had really begun to wonder whether Rod knew where he was at, when they came upon it again.

They saw Rod bend down, as if to examine some of the marks made by the car tires, and having satisfied himself, he said softly as he arose:

"He came along here, all right, and was heading for the mill; so there's no chance of his having hid out to watch the trail."

"But how do you know he came along here?" asked Josh, puzzled, and always open to pick up knowledge when it pertained to woodcraft.

Rod pointed down to his feet.

"The print of the tires are plain enough, I should think," Elmer ventured.

"Yes," said Josh, triumphantly, "but how does Rod know *which* print is the one he made just now, tell me that?"

"Huh!" grunted Rooster, to the astonishment of the others, "as easy as falling off a log. The one that's on top, I take it. How's that, Rod?"

"Go up ahead, Rooster," said Hanky Panky, not at all averse to seeing Josh taken down a peg; for the other never tired of criticising either Hanky or Rooster when he found a chance.

"Wait a minute, please, both of you," urged Josh. "The thing I really want to know is this: How could Rod tell *which way* the car was going, that made that last mark with the tires? In other words, we were away from the road a little while; and perhaps that man might have changed his mind, and scooted back to the main pike again, for all we know—though of course I don't really believe he did, only I'm trying to get points, you see."

Rod smiled.

"I understand what you mean, Josh," he remarked, "and I'm only too glad to show you how easy it is to tell a simple little thing like that. Here's a place that will prove it, for there's plenty of mud and water in the road. Now, if ever you'd paid any attention to these things, you'd know that when a vehicle splashes, when going at any kind of speed, it doesn't throw the mud *straight* out, and never behind, but nearly always a little ahead. Get that? Well, bend down here, and see where the soft slushy mud flew against this tree trunk. Couldn't you easily tell now which way the car was going that splattered that here; for it's partly around on the side of the tree facing back toward the pike; isn't that so?"

"Well, that takes the cake!" said Josh, staring at the telltale marks on the tree trunk.

"But every word of it's true, we can see that, Rod; and thank you for tellin' us," Rooster immedi-

ately remarked, his face filled with wonder and pleasure over the easy way in which Rod had proven his boast.

"And now let's be getting on again," said Rod. "We'll back away from the road once more, though keeping in touch with it from this time on. But I reckon we can't be very far away from the old mill. Everybody keep an eye out for signs of it through the trees. I think I can hear something like trickling water right now."

"So do I," added Elmer, who was very white, and whose hand trembled when it happened to come in contact with that of Rod, so that the other immediately seized hold of the member, and squeezed it reassuringly.

They moved on, slowly and carefully. The sound of running water became plainer with every step they advanced, until presently they found that they could catch glimpses of some sort of building beyond, partly hidden by the trees that had possibly grown up since the mill site was abandoned years ago.

Then they saw the shingle factory, lying there before them, looking tumbledown and romantic enough with its broken, moss-covered wheel, over which the water from the sluice was running in a slender stream; though most of the creek found another way of reaching the lower level.

Hardly had they come in sight of the ramshackle

building, seen through the bushes, than Josh was heard to say in a quick sharp tone:

"Keep still, everybody, and don't move an inch; because I think I see a face in that broken window yonder, and they might notice us if we moved. Steady now!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SCOUTING.

"STEADY it is!" mumbled Hanky Panky, trying not to move a muscle, so that he might avoid being the one to betray their presence to any watcher.

"There, he's gone now!" Josh went on to say.

"Think he saw us, Rod?" asked Rooster, a little nervously; for he was conscious of the fact that he had made a little involuntary movement at the time Josh first announced his discovery of the face in the broken window of the old building, his inclination at the instant having been to drop flat.

"No, I don't think so," came the reassuring reply. "The fact is, I feel pretty certain that he was looking in another direction. And now we must change our course if we want to get closer to the mill."

"I can see the car where it's been half hidden under that shed!" announced Josh, whose keen vision little could escape.

"Remember what we did to that other machine, at the time we looked in on the bank burglars?" Hanky Panky asked; and as the circumstance had made a great impression on all of them at the time,

they gave him to understand that they had not forgotten.

"Punctured the tires, didn't we, so that they'd blow out as soon as a start was made; and in that way made sure the men could not get away by using their old machine?" Josh hastened to whisper. "Well, what's to hinder our tryin' something of the same kind right now, given half a chance?"

"We may come to that," said Rod; "but not yet. That shed is in plain sight from the window, and it would mean taking big chances if one of us went out there in broad daylight. Perhaps we'd better creep around a while first, and get the lay of the land. There isn't much danger of them slipping off, unless they get wind of the fact that they are watched. And we'll try and avoid that, every way we can."

The deserted shingle factory, that had long ago been used as a grist-mill, was indeed a picturesque sight, as seen from the point where they now lay. Its moss-covered wheel, with many of the blades broken, and the little stream of water rippling down over the green surface, presented a picture that must have appealed to Elmer's artistic sense very forcibly, had it not been for his present anxiety of mind over the welfare of his grandfather.

The very fact that the old gentleman was out of his mind, a harmless nonenity as it were, made the boy more desirous than ever of saving him from any

hardship and indignity to which these cruel men might subject him, in their desire to aim a blow at one of the boys who had foiled their plan of robbery; and perhaps at the same time find a chance to line their pockets with ransom or reward money.

The motorcycle boys lay for some time in a snug nest, where they could watch the mill, through the leaves covering the clump of bushes, and without any risk of being seen themselves.

Now and then they would exchange a few sentences in low tones. Rod was as yet undecided just how they ought to act, and open to suggestions; which was the reason he wished to hear what his chums thought. Sometimes it needed only a word to develop a line of action that would seem promising.

Even taking it for granted that Chief Gallagher would succeed in interesting the Painesville police in the matter, so as to influence them into sending out an expedition to round up the hiding fugitive hobo thieves, it was a question as to just how long they would be in coming.

Rod thought an hour would be the shortest time in which they could expect any help to reach them, and perhaps it might be much longer.

Meantime it was up to the boys to gather all the information possible, so that they could hand it over to the police, and thus save time. If they could only get a line on what the two desperate men were

doing in there, and just how Mr. Overton was confined, it would help amazingly.

Rod wondered whether such a thing could be done. He was in a humor to make the attempt, if only he saw a chance that seemed to promise a fair measure of success. In fact, the more he thought about it, the stronger became his desire to creep up, so as to gain a position under the mill, where he fancied he might learn what he wanted to know.

But one of the boys ought to be sent back to the junction of the two roads, so as to be in position to stop the police when they came along, and put them wise to certain facts.

Rod knew that it would be useless trying to get Elmer to do this work, simply because he was naturally the most anxious of them all to hang around, and be on the ground; for it was his grandfather who was in the hands of these unscrupulous rogues. And then again, he was inclined to feel that if so be he attempted to get close up to the mill, so as to crawl underneath, and listen to what might be said above, Elmer should accompany him.

Hanky Panky might do; certainly not Rooster, who could never be depended on in an emergency; but after all, Josh would be apt to carry out the business better than either of the others.

Would he accept the duty, or raise objections? Rod knew Josh of old, and also how the impetuous

one always wished to be upon the firing line when anything exciting was going on.

But he also knew that Josh, if once he was shown what his stern duty was, would heave a sigh, and make sacrifices for the general good. Back of his impulsiveness he was a splendid fellow, and while disposed to play practical jokes on some of his mates at times, could always be depended on for support in a grave crisis like the present.

And so Rod began to speak in low tones, having gathered the other four close around him. He explained what their plain duty was in the premises, and how foolish it would be for them to expect to capture the two armed and desperate criminals alone and unaided, unless some remarkable opportunity came along.

Then he told how very important it was that one of their number should be sent back to the junction of the two roads to watch for the police, and lead them to where the old shingle factory stood—not that they might be unable to reach the place if left to themselves; but certain information which could be placed in their possession, would be apt to prove valuable.

"And to carry out this important task I've decided to ask Josh to take it in hand, because I think he's best fitted for the work. You'll go, won't you, Josh? Chances are, there'll be nothing doing until you return with the officers; and so you'll miss none

of the excitement. And perhaps the whole success of our undertaking may lie in stopping the police from showing themselves as they come hurrying along here. Why, they might even follow in with a car, and spoil everything."

Josh frowned, and seemed to consider. He was plainly keenly disappointed, because he must have wanted to keep with the others, and be in touch with all that went on.

But second thought caused him to heave a great big sigh; and hearing this, Rod knew that the victory was won. Josh would accept the task, however objectionable it might appear.

"I s'pose I'll just *have* to give in, and go, Rod," he muttered, "but I on'y hope you fellows don't have *all* the fun while I'm away. Course I know that what you say is the stuff, Rod; and that somebody ought to be waitin' for the police down by the main pike; but I wisht you'd picked on Rooster here, or Hanky Panky. Say, don't you think they could do the job O. K., Rod?" this last pleadingly, as though at the very last he were clutching at a straw.

"They might," answered Rod, "but I want to be sure, and that's why I've asked you to undertake it, Josh."

The other smothered a groan. Even the flattery implied by these words of Rod did not atone for his disappointment in having to cut loose from his

chums, and wander off alone, to take up his vigil a mile away, watching for those who, possibly might be long hours in making an appearance, if they came at all.

Josh swallowed hard.

"All right, Rod, I'll go," he said; "tell me when to start, that's all."

"I think you'd better be off right away," was the answer. "You know we've spent some time already in coming here, and hanging around; and how can we tell but what those Painesville police may be built on different lines from our lazy Garland force? Why, they might get a hustle on them, and be at the junction about as soon as you could get there."

"Then I'm off right away; only I do hope I ain't agoin' to lose anything worth while by doin' this," Josh went on to say, dolefully.

"You'll win Elmer's undying gratitude, for one thing, Josh," Rod told him; and the party most interested, hearing this, hastened to add:

"I give you my word, Josh, I never will fo'get it, never, suh!" and to add emphasis to these few fervent words, spoken in an agitated whisper, he groped for the hand of the messenger, and gave it a hearty squeeze.

So Josh backed out, and the last they saw of him he was making his way toward the rear, taking advantage of whatever cover he found most handy.

Rod dismissed Josh from his mind then and there. He had other things to consider; and did not doubt in the least but that the other would easily follow the old road back to its junction with the pike. Here he could lie in wait, ready to bob up should he discover a car containing a detachment of blue-coated police coming along.

Next to consider was the chance of reaching the under part of the old mill; and when he suggested such a move to Elmer, the latter immediately declared for making the attempt.

Of course Hanky Panky and Rooster felt disappointed to know that they would not be included in the scouting party; but being accustomed to having Rod take the reins in his hands in matters like this, and having just seen how impulsive and headstrong Josh had given in, when he wanted to do something entirely different, of course they agreed to remain in hiding just where they were, and wait for developments.

Rooster was enjoined in particular to be careful about making any movement that might draw attention to the spot; and not even to go to sleep; for he sometimes had a weakness for lying on the flat of his back, and breathing so hard that his chums declared it sounded like muttering thunder.

After having made all the arrangement possible, Rod told Elmer to creep along after him; and leaving the others lying there back of the bushes, the

scouts began a circuitous course which, if luck favored them, Rod believed would in good time allow them to creep under the flooring of the old mill, unseen and unsuspected.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WELCOME CROW OF A ROOSTER.

By degrees Rod laid out his plan of campaign, as he discovered an avenue along which the mill might be approached, without exposing themselves to the gaze of any one who happened to be looking from above.

After the place had been utterly abandoned, the clearing had grown up in dense scrub. Nature is very kind that way, and if given a chance will almost always do her part in the struggle to hide a scar, by covering the gash in the timber with a new growth.

By making a wide detour, Rod saw how they might reach a point where this second growth grew densest. The fact that there did not seem to be any windows on that side of the old building also helped, more or less.

Elmer kept close at his heels. They had arranged a sort of telegraphic line of communication that, in the absence of words, would serve to give warning of danger, and also any change of plans. Thus Rod could tap his chum on the hand or head with his

toe; and so many pats stood for a certain thing; while on his part Elmer, if he made a discovery, and wished to confer with the leader, would be able to let him know this fact by giving his foot three tugs.

But they did not find occasion to employ this clever system of communication on the way to the mill, for there was no need. The cover proved all that Rod had expected; and they managed to creep along so carefully that nothing of an exciting nature came to pass; save that once Rod placed his hand on a small water snake, and received a shock, though he instantly realized how harmless the reptile was.

And when finally, after being on the move for at least fifteen minutes, they found themselves crawling under the end of the building that projected several feet above the pile of sawdust, and was not closed in, both boys felt that they had cause for feeling satisfied with the progress made.

Here the sound of running water came more plainly to their ears. It was a fretful, complaining noise, as though the little bustling stream could never accommodate itself to the changed conditions that had prevailed since the closing of the once busy mill, once run by water power alone.

Rod immediately set about examining the space underneath the building. Perhaps he was even in hopes of finding some sort of trap-door in the flooring above, by means of which they might gain ac-

cess to the mill, should they decide to take the risk of such a bold move. No doubt there must be some sort of opening, through which this accumulated sawdust had been thrown in times past, filling much of the cavity underneath the former grist-mill.

Stopping to listen carefully, they thought they could hear the scuffling of feet above them; yes, and once some object fell on the floor with a loud bang, giving Elmer something of a shock, for naturally he was thinking constantly of his poor old grandfather, who was held by these unscrupulous men, and felt quite nervous.

After looking around for a short time Rod discovered that there was quite a good-sized hole in one place, where the flooring had given way to the ravages of decay. He did his best to press his ear against this, in the hope of hearing something that was being said above.

The result was not very satisfactory. True, he caught a word or two occasionally, and this alone told him that the two men must be close by; but owing to the splashing and gurgling of the running water it was utterly impossible for even his keen ears to get a line on what they might be talking about.

So, leaving that place, he crawled still further under the mill. Elmer, waiting to learn what he might discover that could help them, was dismayed to see Rod come pushing hastily back again, as

though he had suddenly changed his mind; and evidently laboring under a little excitement.

"What's wrong, Rod?" he whispered, in his chum's ear.

"Nothing doing over there for us," came the reply, in the same cautious tone as the question had been put. "I ran across some sort of animal that seems to have a hiding-place back there where it's nearly dark. It snarled at me like a savage thing, and you ought to have seen its yellow eyes glow. So I made up my mind that after all I didn't hanker after crawling any further under the floor."

"But what could it be, a wild dog, or a cat, or a 'coon?" asked Elmer.

"Don't know, and what's more, I'm not going to take any trouble to find out," was Rod's low reply. "Anyhow, what's the use bothering; we couldn't do anything under there even if we found a trap into the mill, it's so hard to turn around. Let's look over here, and see what we can find."

They had soon explored all the territory lying under the floor of the shingle factory, save that portion where Rod had found an unexpected tenant that objected strenuously to being disturbed.

Grown a little bolder by their knowledge of their surroundings, the two boys concluded to go further, and creep along the outside of the building. They could manage to keep pretty well hidden, so that at least no one inside might glimpse them. If Hanky

Panky and Rooster, from their hiding-place, discovered the moving figures, they were not apt to do anything to betray their comrades, by trying to get in communication with them.

The idea with Rod was that if only they could manage to learn just where the old gentleman was confined, so as to keep him from straying away, possibly they might be able to effect his rescue. And as that was the extent of their interest in the matter, the arrest of the two fugitive hobo thieves could be left to the police. Certainly, just at that moment neither of the motorcycle boys cared what was to happen to the pair.

Rod would not have considered doing anything about the matter, only that Elmer was so very anxious. The latter feared that, should the officers arrive, and their approach be discovered by the two rogues, the men would endeavor to stand the bluecoats off, and might even threaten harm to the helpless old gentleman unless they were allowed to get away from the spot. And that would complicate matters, as well as put Mr. Overton, who was as harmless as a child, and also as helpless, in a bad position.

Just ahead of him Rod noticed that there was a board that had partly fallen from the side of the mill, so that one end rested on the ground. It looked as though this might offer an opening through which, if they were very careful, they

could get some idea as to the arrangement of things inside. At any rate, he determined to try and see if it could be made to work.

First of all, he wanted to let Elmer know what his plan was. In order to accomplish this he had to draw his chum alongside, and then do a little whispering in his ear.

Then, flattening himself out so that he could crawl along close to the ground, Rod began his dangerous advance. Once just below the hole in the wall, he could as he saw fit, gradually raise himself until he was able to look through the friendly aperture that had offered so fortunately just then.

The little maneuver worked as well as he had hoped for. He rose up so slowly that there was not one chance in a thousand for any one's attention to be attracted toward the spot by any rash movement which he made.

What he saw was just this: The two men, whom he recognized as the same fellows who had tried to rob Farmer Crooke, though they had made an effort to change their looks somewhat, were sitting close together; and smoking cigars, as though able to afford the best in the land, regardless of expense.

They seemed to be talking earnestly about something; and several times the shorter rascal made a gesture with his right hand, as though the object of their consultation was the old man seated in a chair over by the table, and dozing as calmly as though

he were safe in his own room in the Overton home.

Rod did not need a second look to tell him one thing. It was Grandfather Overton beyond all question, for he knew him as well as he did his own relative. And so, it seemed that theory about the wandering old gentleman having been accidentally picked up by the two hobo yeggmen, and carried off when they learned who he was, with some deep object in view, had not been wrong after all.

Rod wished that he might only hear what that shorter man was saying; but he could only guess from the gestures he made that he was advocating abandoning their so-called "prize," and scuttling away from the spot. Perhaps he had some reason for wanting to do this. It might be he feared that this action of theirs in carrying off Mr. Overton, was fated to be the means of bringing them into a peck of trouble. Possibly that shorter rascal even "felt it in his bones" that right then and there they were in greater danger than appeared on the outside.

He at least showed signs of being exceedingly nervous, for every little while he would jump up, and stride to the broken window nearest, to take a survey of the scene outside. And Rod understood that it must have been his face Josh had discovered at the time he told the others not to move hand or foot.

Remembering that two of the boys had been left

not so very far away, Rod seemed to feel his heart trying to come up into his throat every time the man made for his place of observation, lest Rooster or Hanky Panky just at that very moment might be in the act of rising up to take another look, and thus be seen.

He tried to figure out what he and Elmer ought to do under such conditions. If the alarmed men, thinking only of their own safety, attempted flight, and seemed willing to leave Grandfather Overton behind, why, Rod was of a mind to shout out good-bye after them, and consider their flitting in the light of a good riddance. But if, on the other hand, they tried to force the old man to go along with them, that would be a different condition to be met and handled.

He decided that in such a case the only thing for them to do would be to pretend that the place was surrounded by a force of police; and by shouting all sorts of things, so excite and alarm the men that they would be glad to let their prisoner go free, and think only of their own flight.

And, since it seemed that they could do nothing to effect the rescue of Elmer's grandfather, alone and by themselves, why, the next best thing to be done was to withdraw as they had come; always remembering the suspicious nature of the shorter rascal, and giving him no chance to discover them crawling away.

Elmer's face fell several degrees when he learned of this decision. He had been hugging all sorts of extravagant hopes of a rescue to his heart; and now that Rod seemed ready to withdraw, struck him as losing ground.

But then, even in this time of distress, he believed that Rod knew best; so that, no matter what he may have thought, he silently set about following the other in retracing their steps.

They had not gone more than half-way when Rod touched the other with his foot, and halted long enough for him to come alongside.

"Oh! what is it?" breathed the eager Elmer in his ear, and was electrified to hear the other say in reply:

"I am sure I heard the crow of a rooster far away; and it must have been Josh trying to give the signal agreed on, to tell us the officers are near!"

CHAPTER XXX.

CONCLUSION.

Those whispered words spoken by Rod Bradley must have thrilled Elmer to the core, for they told him that the agony of suspense was soon to be only a memory. Of course it yet remained to be seen how well the officers could make their advance upon the old shingle factory, so as to be able to spring upon the two men, and effect their capture, before they had time to make a hostile move, or dream of flight.

Rod, however, was not the one to grow careless because he had reason to believe the finish of the game was near. He had seen more than one baseball match decided adversely, because of too much confidence, that made the players careless, until the other side had taken a sudden brace, and gained the lead at the very end of the ninth inning.

And so he continued to creep along just as cautiously as though nothing out of the common had happened. The crowing had sounded twice more, and as that was part of the signal agreed on with

Josh, he knew more than ever now that his first guess must be the true one, and that their chum was leading the officers in the direction of the spot, following the trail they themselves had made.

Presently, having come to where Hanky Panky and Rooster were crouching, eagerly awaiting their return, so as to hear the report they would bring, Rod explained the situation to them in a few sentences.

As Josh had been instructed to lead the police to that same place, as the one best spot where they could spy upon the tumble-down old building, before making any sort of attack, all the boys had to do now was to wait in patience.

It seemed hours to Elmer before Rod announced that he certainly saw a slight movement in the bushes back along the trail, which must mean that those they were expecting had arrived.

And sure enough, the first to appear was Josh himself, with a wide grin on his face, as though he considered that he had acquitted himself handsomely in managing the part of the business entrusted to him. Nor were any of his chums inclined to question his right to think that way, or to assume the airs of a victor.

How it thrilled them, every one, to see that line of crawling bluecoats coming sinuously along the trail, every man on his hands and knees, and evidently bent upon carrying out his particular

part of the surprise as though the entire success of the expedition depended solely on his efforts.

Rooster was red in the face, and Rod had to give him several warning frowns. He just knew that the other was itching to jump right up, and clapping his hands on his thighs, let out several clarion crows, as he always did when exulting, because things were coming his way. So of course Rooster, understanding how silly it would be to crow before the victory was actually won, choked down his wild impulse, and made motions with his head to assure Rod that he would be good.

Three, four, five, why, there were actually *six* of the officers on deck, showing that Painesville had responded nobly to the appeal sent out from Headquarters in Garland. It was in line with their duty, this endeavoring to make prisoners of the two desperate yeggmen who had done so many "jobs" in the country; so that just as likely as not, after they were captured and photographed, it would be discovered that they were well known, and that some sort of reward was offered for their apprehension.

Well, so far as the motorcycle boys were concerned, the police were entirely welcome to all the money that was coming. What Rod and Elmer and their mates wanted was to carry off the prisoner the men were holding in the old shingle factory. Once let them feel that Mr. Overton was safe, and

little they cared what became of the hoboes who had picked him up on the road, after he had wandered away from his home, as he sometimes did, being utterly irresponsible.

A hurried conversation took place between Rod and the officer who semed to be in charge of the force sent to apprehend the rascals.

It was speedily agreed on that the best move to make would be to advance upon the mill along the same path the two boys had taken. Once they reached the shelter of the building, they could watch their chance, and suddenly rush in upon the men, taking them by surprise, and in this way finishing up the matter in a hurry.

Again Rod led off, and Elmer insisted on keeping directly after him. Then came a couple of the officers, after which Josh persisted in inserting himself in line; followed by the rest, even Hanky Panky, and Rooster taking a turn at the end.

They made no attempt at haste, which perhaps was a wise thing. And moving so very slowly, they ran little chance of detection. In the end all of them had gathered there under the floor of the mill, ready for the next step.

Rod was now willing to yield his place in the van to the leader of the police. He had piloted them safely over the course, and now that the action was apt to take on a more stormy phase, it was only right that the boys, being unarmed,

should fall back, and let those better fitted for the work go up ahead.

This time, after issuing forth from under the mill, the advance was made along the other side from that where the loose board lay. The door was to be found here, and all of them already knew that it was partly open at the time.

Six burly men in blue moved carefully along against the side of the old rookery, which, long years ago had echoed with the racket and roar of grinding machinery; and later on witnessed the making of thousands of packs of shingles; but of late had been given wholly over to the bats, and perhaps ghosts of the past.

It was a time of great suspense to the boys. They wondered again and again how the two rascals inside the mill would act, when they saw those gallant officers come streaming in upon them, with hoarse demands for their immediate surrender. Would they make a desperate effort at resistance? Elmer was hoping and praying that if such a thing did come about, his poor grandfather, sitting there at the table so innocently, might escape all harm.

But they did not have long to wait; for when he found that he had all of his men at his back, with the open door close by, the leader of the police raised his hand, to let them know it was time. The boys saw that they had drawn their guns; and just then it began to look quite stormy.